

THE MISUSE OF THE STUDIES AND OBSERVATION GROUP  
AS A NATIONAL ASSET IN VIETNAM

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MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
General Studies

by

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## ABSTRACT

THE MISUSE OF THE STUDIES AND OBSERVATION GROUP AS A NATIONAL ASSET IN VIETNAM, by MAJ Danny M. Kelley II, 85 pages.

The primary question this thesis aims to answer is--did the Studies and Observation Group (SOG) covert and clandestine operations contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort? The scope of research is an examination of SOG operations throughout the war. To determine SOG's contributions, research will answer the following secondary and tertiary questions: (1) What were the US strategic, operational, and tactical goals for Vietnam and how did they develop? (2) Did SOG contribute to the accomplishment of strategic, operational, and tactical goals in the Vietnam War? and (3) How did SOG missions affect enemy forces and their operations?

By answering the primary, secondary, and tertiary questions, a conclusion may be drawn concerning the contributions of SOG in Vietnam as the primary headquarters for carrying out the unconventional war effort against the North Vietnamese. Lessons learned may apply to the use of similar unconventional warfare assets in the Global War on Terrorism.

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## ACRONYMS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
JACK	Joint Advisory Commission, Korea
MACV	Military Assistance Command Vietnam
NSAM	National Security Action Memorandum
NVA	North Vietnamese Army
OPLAN	Operations Plan
OSS	Office of Strategic Services
SACSA	Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities
SEAL	Sea Air Land
SECDEF	Secretary of Defense
SOAR	Special Operations Aviation Regiment
SOG	Studies and Observations Group
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VC	Viet Cong

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

To prevent North Vietnam's victory, Bui Tin (a retired NVA Colonel interviewed in 1995) observed, the United States would have had to "cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail." The human rights activist queried, "Cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail?" "Yes," he repeated, "cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail inside of Laos. If Johnson had granted General Westmoreland's request to enter Laos and block the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Hanoi could not have won the war." He then explained the strategic importance of the trail for Hanoi's escalation and conduct of the war. It was the only way "to bring sufficient military power to bear on the fighting in the South. Building and maintaining the trail was a huge effort, involving tens of thousands of soldiers, drivers, repair teams, medical stations, and communications units." If it had been cut, Hanoi could not have intensified the fighting with NVA regulars, as it did in 1965. This did not mean that the United States and its South Vietnamese client would automatically have won. No, they still had to defeat the Viet Cong and win support of the people. Nevertheless, cutting the trail would have made those tasks significantly easier.

It was a telling revelation from one who should know. As the discussion unfolded, Colonel Bui Tin's observations became more and more convincing--they actually made sense. This raises a fundamental question. If this made such obvious sense, how is it that the best and brightest didn't figure it out during the war? (1999, 205-206)

Richard H. Shultz Jr., *The Secret War Against Hanoi*

#### Introduction

The United States lost the Vietnam War for a variety of reasons. Some are mentioned above. It is not the purpose of this thesis to examine the war in its entirety and argue the myriad of causes surrounding the failure. However, this thesis will examine in detail the contribution of the Studies and Observations Group (SOG) in Vietnam and the decisions of senior leaders involved. As a Joint Special Operations Task Force, SOG managed the unconventional war effort focused on North Vietnam from 1964 to 1971.



This thesis will show that SOG did not contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort. The unconventional war effort outside Vietnam was a failure strategically and operationally. By answering the following research questions, this conclusion will be evident.

### Research Question

The primary question this thesis aims to answer is--did Studies and Observation Group (SOG) covert and clandestine operations contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort? The scope of research is an examination of SOG operations and senior leader decisions throughout its existence from 1964 to 1971. To determine the contribution of SOG to the war effort, research will answer the following secondary and tertiary questions: (1) What were the US strategic, operational, and tactical goals for Vietnam and how did they develop? (2) Did SOG contribute to the accomplishment of strategic, operational, and tactical goals in the Vietnam War? and (3) How did SOG missions affect enemy forces and their operations? By answering the primary, secondary, and tertiary questions, a conclusion may be drawn concerning the contribution of SOG in Vietnam.

### Qualifications

I am a Major in the US Army who is special operations aviation qualified. Prior to attending CGSC, I served for three years in the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) (Airborne). The USAF and CIA forerunners to my unit supported SOG missions in Vietnam. As a participant in several classified task force operations, I deployed to support Operation Enduring Freedom twice and Operation Iraqi Freedom once. I have also conducted other classified operations worldwide. While in the 160th

SOAR, I served as Platoon Leader, Detachment Commander, MH-60K Blackhawk Pilot-in-Command, Air Mission Commander, Regimental Training Officer and Special Operations Liaison Officer. I flew and led multiple combat air assault missions in support of numerous objectives. I am interested in this topic because I want to examine what the forerunners of my task forces did in Vietnam. I want to examine their war and see if I can identify lessons that might apply to the future. I believe I can remain objective regardless of the results of my research. It is common for those in my former organization to be extremely self-critical at times in order to improve the unit and our own performance. It is part of the unit culture to conduct brutal after action reviews. I see this thesis as an opportunity to conduct a candid assessment of SOG's utility in Vietnam.

### Background

The background of this research topic stems from the debate underway concerning the Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). Some military officers are convinced that the nation is effectively waging and winning the war utilizing the traditional elements of national power (diplomatic, informational, military, and economic). However, others claim the US is not winning the war or that the US is not utilizing some or all elements of national power effectively. The debate concerning the effective use of the military capabilities of the US is especially divisive. Some officers within the US military are convinced that the effective use of CIA covert action forces and of DOD clandestine forces is critical to achieving victory (Grossman 2004, 1). Others prefer a more conventional military solution with transformed Army Brigade Combat Teams. A third group favors a tailored combination of both. However, disagreement over the

military option that proves to be most effective in all theaters of operation persists (MacGregor 2004, 10).

Since 11 September 2001, the US military and their allies have engaged in combat operations starting in Afghanistan, then extending into Iraq; all the while conducting military operations in the Philippines and in other regions around the world. Today, the entire US military (Active, Reserve, and National Guard components), are decisively engaged fighting an aggressive insurgency in Iraq while hunting elusive terrorists in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the globe, to include homeland defense operations. Threats of terrorist strikes against the US and its allies continue.

Determining a more effective use of military resources to meet the strategic goal of defeating international terrorists and the nations who sponsor them is a difficult problem. In the past, policy makers faced similar problems in trying to determine how to defeat a growing communist insurgency in South Vietnam. The US employed a mixture of DOD clandestine operations, CIA covert action forces, and conventional military units in the prosecution of the conflict. This research will be focussed on a detailed examination and evaluation of SOG operations during the Vietnam War. Lessons learned from their use in Vietnam may apply to operations conducted by their modern-day equivalents.

### Assumptions

Certain key assumptions are critical to this research.

1. The significant contribution of using SOG forces can be measured by discovering whether or not they accomplished their objectives and assessing how their actions impacted the enemy.

2. A comparison of the relative worth of achieving stated objectives versus losing soldiers' lives is feasible merely through examination of casualty figures versus mission success rates.

3. Enough reliable data in the unclassified realm exists upon which to accurately base findings.

4. Lessons learned or insights gained concerning covert and clandestine operations from Vietnam may apply to current operations in the GWOT.

### Key Terms

The first and foremost key term is "Studies and Observation Group". The Military Assistance Command Vietnam, Studies and Observation Group (MACV-SOG or just SOG) was a special operations task force formed officially on 24 January 1964 as part of Operation Parasol/Switchback under OPLAN 34A. OPLAN 34A was the blueprint for Department of Defense control of the covert war in Vietnam. Prior to that date, covert military actions were under the control of Vietnam CIA Station Chief William Colby in accordance with National Security Memorandum 52 (Plaster 2000, 18). SOG included elements of Army Special Forces (the Green Berets), Air Force Air Commandos and Navy SEALs. At times, SOG also had dedicated air forces. Additionally, numerous allied personnel worked for SOG, such as South Vietnamese, Chinese Nungs, and Montagnards. These individuals, who were handpicked and trained by SOG operators, made up the majority of personnel who served on the SOG reconnaissance teams in the Vietnam War. For chain of command purposes, "SOG answered directly to the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Pentagon via special liaison, the special assistant for counterinsurgency and special activities (SACSA)" (Plaster 2000, 18). SOG's budget was

concealed in US Navy appropriations, and their logistical support came from the Counterinsurgency Support Office (CISO) headquartered in Okinawa. Additionally, SOG received logistical support from the CIA's Far East support base at Camp Chinen, Okinawa (Plaster 2000, 18).

The term "limited war" refers to the theory that military action was less important than the message it sent to enemies. The theory argued that the "use of force could be orchestrated in such a way as to communicate precise and specific signals and that an opponent would back down in the face of such threats and pressure" (Herring 1994, 5). The theory also takes into consideration morality issues. Observe the following quote.

Intelligent morality is superior to capricious moralism. If intelligence demands the steady, scrupulous discipline of military force, then it is more creditable to endure the sacrifices and frustrations of limited war and preparation for limited war than to reject them merely for the sake of gratifying superficially moral instincts. This kind of abdication of nerve and reason amounts to an admission that the United States and its allies lack the material and spiritual resources to better the Communist powers in a protracted struggle; but every exercise of foresight and restraint that gives rational direction to military power affirms faith in the propositions that time can be made to work for the side of freedom. (Osgood 1957, 283-284)

The limited war theory served as the basis for the Kennedy and Johnson administrations' strategy in Vietnam (Herring 1994, 5). This was a change from total war theory espoused by the Eisenhower administration (Osgood 1957, 212). Further discussion of both theories will occur in the analysis portion of this thesis.

The definitions of the three levels of war--strategic, operational, and tactical are also key to this research.

**Strategic level of war:** - The level of war at which a nation, often as a member of a group of nations determines national or multinational (alliance or coalition) security objectives and guidance, and develops and uses national resources to accomplish these objectives. Activities at this level establish national and

multinational military objectives; sequence initiatives; define limits and assess risks for the use of military and other instruments of national power; develop global plans or theater war plans to achieve these objectives; and provide military forces and other capabilities in accordance with strategic plans. (Joint Publication 1-02 2001, 507)

Operational level of war. The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or operational areas. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve the operational objectives, initiating actions, and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they ensure the logistic and administrative support of tactical forces, and provide the means by which tactical successes are exploited to achieve strategic objectives. See also strategic level of war; tactical level of war. (Joint Publication 1-02 2001, 389)

Tactical level of war. The level of war at which battles and engagements are planned and executed to accomplish military objectives assigned to tactical units or task forces. Activities at this level focus on the ordered arrangement and maneuver of combat elements in relation to each other and to the enemy to achieve combat objectives. See also operational level of war; strategic level of war. (Joint Publication 1-02 2001, 522)

Understanding what delineates operational goals from strategic or tactical goals is crucial to answering the primary research question. Other key terms are included in the glossary.

### Limitations

Limitations on this study derive from the amount of available declassified research data. It is impossible to know whether or not the declassified data accessible for research portrays the most accurate description of the bulk of SOG activities. The records of failures or successes might be classified, undocumented, or lost. Nonetheless, it is possible to conduct thorough research and provide an analysis of the lessons learned from

covert operations. The research may lead to conclusions that are applicable to ongoing military operations in the Global War on Terrorism.

### Delimitations

The delimitations to this study are of both scope and content. The scope is limited to the study of SOG operations in the Vietnam War from 1963 to 1971. The content is limited to SOG operations only and does not include a detailed analysis of other special operations units conducting similar missions. Other unit operations are only discussed when SOG supported them directly or vice versa.

### Significance

The study is significant because it focuses on a specific DOD military task force and supporting assets that are analogous to forces that exist today. Detailed discussion of the ongoing use of these forces or even their composition is not possible due to their classified nature. However, the study of a similar unit in Vietnam will facilitate the identification of lessons learned that have application to present day operations. The proper strategic and operational use of current forces can be evaluated based on a critical analysis of the conduct of past operations. The tactics, techniques, and procedures developed and refined by SOG have relevance today as well as in the future.

There are other works that have discussed the research topic. However, their scope seemed focused on either the heroism of individuals and units or on the brutality of forces operating seemingly without remorse towards the enemy. There is little research material available that examines whether or not the creation of SOG was useful to the

Vietnam War effort. By addressing the utility of SOG in Vietnam, this thesis should add to the body of material concerning the use of covert military operations in Vietnam.



## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

There is no shortage of literature concerning the overall thesis topic. Numerous books, articles, and documentaries examine the strategy of the United States in Vietnam. There is also a great deal of literature concerning the use of covert operations during the Vietnam War. Some of these books are specifically written about the thesis topic. What are difficult and limiting to the research are the lack of sources available from the North Vietnamese point of view and a general lack of discussion of operational warfare in detail.

The first grouping of books and articles in the review are those specifically concerning SOG. These works describe SOG in detail and delve into the tactical and operational goals of the unit as well as the results of operations. They are the core books of the research. The second grouping relates to strategy. Multiple sources link strategic guidance with the tactical efforts of SOG. Conclusions drawn concerning the guidance given to SOG commanders by the National Command Authorities (NCA) at the time are critical to answering the primary research question. The third grouping relates to the enemy perspectives. This grouping of books is useful to examine the effects of SOG operations on the enemy. In addition, the works are useful to determine whether or not the NCA chose the most effective strategy based on the enemy situation in Vietnam.

The first book to be reviewed was written by one of SOG's veterans, Major (Retired) John L. Plaster, U.S. Army. Many military officers in the special operations forces community regard Major Plaster as an expert in the field. In his book, *SOG The*

*Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*, he describes the formation of the unit and covers its tactical missions from unit formation through December 1971 when the last reconnaissance team operated in the Ashau Valley. The book examines SOG's operational roots in the CIA under station chief William Colby and describes the change in American policy that shifted responsibility for paramilitary operations against North Vietnam from the CIA to the United States military under OPLAN-34A issued 15 December 1963. Plaster details CIA elements that were retained under the unit's control and describes the individuals involved and their respective contributions to the formation of the unit. For the most part, this book is useful for its account of how the unit was formed and organized and for its description of the tactical missions of the unit. In addition, the descriptions of the individual heroism of members of SOG and those who supported them shed light on the quality of men who served in the organization. The primary contribution of this source is to understand and appreciate the tactical challenges of SOG missions and the outstanding service of the men involved.

A second book by Major (Retired) John L. Plaster in the review is *SOG: A Photo History of the Secret Wars*. In this book, he discusses the formation of the unit and some of the unit's early missions in much the same manner as in *SOG The Secret Wars of America's Commandos in Vietnam*. However, the multiple photos used throughout the book add to the description of the organization and their tactics. Additionally, there is more discussion of support elements such as the aviation units that supported SOG. The two books complement each other and paint an illuminating picture of the tactics of SOG, the type of men who served in the unit, and the individual tactics, techniques and procedures used during their various missions. One argument effectively made by both

books is that “SOG’s all-volunteer Special Forces elements suffered casualties not comparable with those of any other U.S. units of the Vietnam War” (Plaster 2000, 466). The second argument was that SOG’s “investment of less than a company-sized U.S. force tied down the equivalent of four-plus divisions in Laos and Cambodia, an economy of force unparalleled in U.S. history, perhaps without precedent in world military history” (2000, 466).

The third book by Major (Retired) John L. Plaster is *Secret Commandos*. This book discusses in vivid detail the personal story of the author’s experience in SOG. It is a soldier’s story that gives insight into the mind of one of SOG’s former operators. In his two previous books discussed above, the author describes the tactical operations of SOG from a reporter’s point of view. This book is a first person account, which contributes to the thesis by showing how the author’s credentials and experience relate to his previous works. The story describes his entry in the Army, selection and training as a Special Forces soldier and his eventual assignment to SOG in Vietnam where he served three tours of duty.

The interview with MAJ (Ret) John Plaster took place on 7 January 2005. Questions concerned issues discussed in his books as well as other topics discovered in the research. One question concerned Colonel Russel’s (the first Commander of SOG) early dilemma. Under OPLAN 34A, two of SOG’s objectives were to weaken North Vietnamese internal security and to disrupt the re-supply network through Laos called the Ho Chi Minh Trail. However, President Johnson would not approve of starting a resistance network in North Vietnam or commit to cross border incursions against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos. The only targets they approved had little military value and did

not make sense (Shultz 1999, 45). At that point, how did Colonel Russel decide what operations to do?

He was told not to consider, not to wait, not to analyze. He was told to execute. These were operations dictated by Washington, which were approved individually at White House, State Department and DOD Secretary of Defense level. It was further complicated by the fact that because these were individually weighed and approved and often modified, he would send forth this list of targets saying 'well, we could be prepared to execute this mission by the first of July'. It would take so long to teletype it back to Washington by secure means. By the time it was hand carried through the White House and the State Department and the Department of Defense, and meanwhile perhaps there was an objection of some kind where a need to modify placed a requirement placed on top of it, well then it had to be resubmitted. If there ever was an opportunity, quite frankly it passed. It was too late but they were still compelled to execute. (Plaster 2005)

Another question concerned the shift in SOG operational goals after the Tet offensive in 1968. President Johnson suspended the bombing campaign in North Vietnam after the Tet offensive. This decision freed US air power assets for targets located in Laos. The North Vietnamese responded by moving additional air defense assets to Laos to protect their logistics network. Despite this, SOG Reconnaissance teams performed a higher percentage of deliberate targeting missions after the Tet offensive compared with operations prior to Tet in 1968 (Plaster 2005).

Other questions shed light on the integration of air, maritime, and ground operations at the tactical level, involvement of the US Ambassador to Laos in the decision making process, and the use of SOG-generated intelligence by the conventional forces in South Vietnam. Plaster's answers proved useful and were consistent with other sources beyond Plaster's books used in the research.

*Hazardous Duty*, written by Major General John K. Singlaub is an autobiographical account of his almost 40 years of active service to the nation.

Throughout his career, Major General Singlaub served in a wide variety of covert and

conventional assignments to include his assignment as the third Commander of SOG in Vietnam from 1966 to 1968. He describes his job performance as the Commander of SOG and provides his unique insight concerning the strategic, operational and tactical challenges of commanding the unit. He discusses the impact of his unit's operations against the enemy and his views on the success of his operations. Overall, he places the impact of his unit in the context of the overall impact of other units in Vietnam. Additionally, he describes some of the intrigue within the intelligence and military community at the time. This is relevant because it relates to the challenges SOG faced when CIA officers were placed under the control of the military after President Johnson implemented OPLAN 34A.

In *Hazardous Duty*, Major General Singlaub writes that the mission of SOG was “similar to that of the OSS or British SOE during World War II: strategic and tactical intelligence, resistance operations, guerrilla warfare, sabotage, and covert ‘black’ psychological operations” (Singlaub 1991, 295). He describes how the unit was organized by operational function. “The unit’s functional arm, the Operations Staff Directorate, was divided into five numbered divisions; Op-31 through Op-35” (1991, 295).

Op-31 was the staff division that supervised our maritime operations, conducted by the Naval Advisory Detachment (NAD) at Danang. This group ran a variety of seaborne operations, including the training and support for the Vietnamese Coastal Survey Service, which was actually a raiding, sabotage, and intelligence force. NAD had a small fleet of high speed, low-slung Norwegian-built wooden torpedo boats, hard to detect on radar. (Singlaub 1991, 295)

This research and other works imply that SOG naval forces contributed to the Gulf of Tonkin incident. Several naval raids were conducted within North Vietnam territory by

the Vietnamese Coastal Survey force just prior to the North Vietnamese attack on the US destroyer USS Maddox on 2 August 1964.

Op-32 was the division that supervised the SOG air force, which was based at Nhatrang in South Vietnam and at two airfields in Thailand. They also had their own separate airfield at Bienhoa, northeast of Saigon. Their forces consisted of modified C-130s and C-123s for agent and supply drops. All aircraft were flown without identifying markings linking them to the US. Additionally, these aircraft “were flown by Chinese air force pilots from Taiwan, who rotated regularly in and out of Vietnam” (1991, 295). SOG also had a sizable helicopter force that consisted of UH-1 Huey troop carriers and gunships, along with a squadron of Vietnamese Air Force CH-34s also without identifying markings (1991, 295).

Op-33 supervised the psychological operations conducted by SOG. The division specialized in ingenious deceptions that ranged from counterfeit North Vietnamese currency to the construction of an elaborate “notional” sham resistance movement known as the Sacred Sword of the Patriot. The primary mission of Op-33 was to foster and exploit discontent among the North Vietnamese military and civilians. (Singlaub 1991, 296)

Op-34 supervised the resistance and intelligence operations division located at Long Thanh, South Vietnam. They operated the primary agent-training site for preparing agents to organize “anti-Communist partisans in the North” (1991, 297). In his book, Singlaub discusses this division’s challenges and setbacks during the war.

The final division of SOG was Op-35. Singlaub writes, “perhaps our biggest and most interesting activity was the cross-border Reconnaissance Teams, supervised by Op-35” (1991, 297). This division of SOG is the best known and written about. Their activities were directed at enemy lines of communication during the war. Overall, Major

General Singlaub's book proves invaluable to the research due to his unique position as the SOG commander. Additionally, his book enhances the operational and tactical discussion of goals achieved by SOG in Vietnam and describes enemy responses to SOG activities.

On 4 March 2005, I conducted an interview with Major General Singlaub at the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. The interview proved especially useful and covered four primary questions. The first question was--what was the most important contribution of SOG to the Vietnam War effort?

I believe that our operations along the Ho Chi Minh trail were very important for several reasons. We learned enough about the operation of the trail (and it was a maze, a meshwork of trails and roads) that we better understood how to attack it. You just couldn't cut one road and expect it to slow down any. We had gained that knowledge not only by on the ground observation and attacking trucks to capture POWs, but also [by capturing] a lot of documents. That tailwind operation that CNN accused us of committing war crimes on in fact policed up all the documents in a transportation battalion headquarters. And from that, the J2 told us later, [they were able to] figure out how they scheduled, how they did this, what steps they would take under certain circumstances. It was just a major haul and enabled us to better disrupt the trail, because it was such an essential part of the operations in the south. If we had just simply cut the trail by moving forces into that part of Laos, the war would have had to stop. They needed that trail. (Singlaub 2005)

In the same context, Singlaub added that he placed company-size American-led multinational forces in Laos to interdict enemy operations using US air support. The most important fire support assets used by his "Hatchet Teams" were the A-1 Skyraiders, because of their lengthy loiter time and higher payloads. These forces were typically able to defeat reinforced company size units of NVA on the trail (Singlaub 2005).

He also stated that moving larger forces into Laos or keeping them on station for longer periods of time would have been difficult because of State Department restrictions.

If we had pushed a force over there, it would have caused great heartache and pain to the few State Department people who considered it their mission in life to preserve the fiction of the neutrality of Laos. That was primarily Ambassador Bill Sullivan. Sullivan had been the spear holder of Harriman when the Geneva accords were established, so he felt it was his personal responsibility. That is why he reacted so whenever we went over there and did something. He would accuse us of having violated his instructions by going in too deep. (Singlaub 2005)

The second question to Singlaub was--could SOG have caused the North Vietnamese to stop their war in South Vietnam if you had “free reign” and no restrictions on your operations from Washington?

There were other ways of stopping the flow of supplies that were essential to stopping the flow of supplies to South Vietnam. The best way would have been to close the port of Haiphong--mine it. It was well into the Nixon administration before they considered that and finally mined it. We were belligerents and the people who were supplying our enemy were using that port. We had an international right to close that port. It was fuzzy minded people in the State Department who advised Johnson that he should not do this--that it was the wrong thing to do. But it would have stopped the flow of supplies. These were being brought in by ships provided by the eastern block. The weapons came from Czechoslovakia and Poland along with ammunition. If we had put those mines in there and one of these ships hit a mine and sank, the insurance would have been so high on the rest of them that they could not have afforded it. It would have ended the war much sooner. So that's clear. It's just pathetic that we allowed that sanctuary to exist. We had a lot of Americans killed because of a fantasy of restriction of use of our force in that area. We should have not given them sanctuary in that area. (Singlaub 2005)

Other comments in answer to the second question concerned the possibility of starting an actual resistance movement in North Vietnam. He did not think it was possible. He related it to a similar experience in North Korea in 1950 where the US sent people who wanted to be free and non-Communist to South Korea. “This meant that we did the work of the North Korean Security Forces. All of their possible insurgents we took out. And you would think we would have learned from that, but we didn't” (Singlaub 2005). Many of the Catholic North Vietnamese who might have supported a resistance against the Communists in the North moved South with US assistance while



the Communists who lived in the South stayed in place. This was in accordance with Ho Chi Minh's wishes and later proved crucial to Viet Cong guerrilla operations in South Vietnam (Singlaub 2005).

By the time he took command, all the agent teams that were put in place by the CIA and his SOG predecessors were compromised.

[They were] being run by North Vietnamese intelligence, just exactly the kind of thing we had in Korea. Well it was my immediate reaction that we would close those teams out, we would terminate them. They had been in long enough that the North Vietnamese intelligence service would realize that they hadn't produced any worthwhile intelligence. We would ordinarily turn them off, but the SACSA, the organization in Washington in the office of the chairman, told us that we were not only to not close them out, but [we were] to increase them. (Singlaub 2005)

In response, he orchestrated a deception effort utilizing the doubled teams to support the false resistance movement and to make the North Vietnamese intelligence service believe that numerous additional teams were inserted. He also attempted to seal various intelligence leaks in the agent insertion program. When he turned over his command to Colonel Steve Cavanaugh in 1968, he recommended that the agent team operation be closed whenever approval was granted (Singlaub 2005).

The third question to Singlaub was--would the assignment of a General officer as the Chief of SOG make a difference in the unconventional and conventional warfare integration?

It was true that I was attending meetings where I was the only non General officer. As long as General Westmoreland was there, he made sure I went to these Southeast Asia Planning Conferences with all the ambassadors from Laos and Cambodia and South Vietnam. Every Saturday morning all the Generals with high clearances and Singlaub got a highly classified briefing and that was very helpful to me. I saved a lot of guys during the Tet offensive because of that. I made some assumptions, and on my own put my unit on alert. And we didn't lose any during that Tet offensive. Actually that is not quite true, we lost a Philipino. . . .

. . . There's no question that a General officer would have had more impact and would have been able to get more information and more

responsiveness of support from the Divisions. If I had been a General officer, they would feel better about asking for my help. (Singlaub 2005)

The final question to Singlaub was--how did he decide what missions to conduct?

We would get targets of opportunity that would be developed as a result of one mission. The mission would be sent in on one thing, to search a specific area, getting there, they found some evidence of a headquarters nearby and generally speaking, I was able to operate without getting Washington approval on it. Now I learned the hard way from the Korean War, to put a tap on a telephone wire, I had to get permission. (Singlaub 2005)

In summary, the interview confirmed information from other sources and shed light on some of the decisions made at the time. Additionally, Singlaub offered information about covert operations conducted by the joint advisory commission Korea (JACK) in the Korean War (a topic for further research).

The book *War in the Shadows: Covert Operations in Vietnam* by the editors of Boston Publishing Company is useful because it assists in trying to determine whether the covert operations in Vietnam were orchestrated as a combined effort to achieve synergy against the efforts of the North Vietnamese government. Analysis of this book highlights operational warfare issues vital to determining whether or not SOG accomplished identified operational goals.

*The Phoenix Program*, by Douglas Valentine (a professional writer), discusses the CIA's operations in Vietnam from a morally critical standpoint. In addition to discussing specific tactics used by CIA covert action forces, his book illuminates Federal investigations over the legality of CIA-run operations. His book addresses SOG operations in a limited fashion where CIA and SOG operations overlapped in Vietnam. The book is useful because it illustrates that CIA and SOG operations were not orchestrated from an operational warfare point of view. Additionally, the book paints

covert operations in a negative, sinister light. This is important to the research because it offers a counterpoint to the preponderance of sources that are somewhat positive concerning US military covert operations.

The article “A Special Naval Unit of the Republic of Vietnam – The Coastal Security Service” by Tran Do Cam, translated from Vietnamese by Donald C. Brewster, is an excellent source on SOG naval operations, especially covert operations at the tactical level. The article also discusses the tactical contribution of SOG’s SEALs and patrol boats that conducted numerous raids. Some of these operations had strategic implications. During the month of July 1964 for example, SOG conducted numerous naval raids against key military and defensive installations in North Vietnam. In addition, they engaged multiple enemy positions and some North Vietnamese naval craft during the conduct of the raids. On 22 July 1964, four SOG patrol boats conducted a raid against selected military outposts and a coastal radar facility near Vinh, North Vietnam. Later on 2 August 1964, the Destroyer Maddox was attacked in the Tonkin Gulf by North Vietnamese torpedo boats. The North Vietnamese claimed their attack was in retaliation for raids against their own military facilities (Cam 2000, 23-25).

One of the most useful sources that apply to this thesis topic is *The Secret War Against Hanoi* by Richard H. Shultz Jr. His book describes the thesis topic in detail and serves as a primary source. In 1995, he received access to formerly classified data from the Commander of the US Army Special Operations Command, Lieutenant General Terry Scott who “realized that SOG’s lessons were being kept secret even from those charged with conducting similar operations today” (Shultz 2000, x). He began his comprehensive investigation of SOG in 1995, drawing almost exclusively on primary sources, which

included interviews with more than sixty officers who ran SOG's operations within each of the four major sub-divisions. He also conducted interviews with four of the five commanders of SOG and senior officials of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations.

Shultz also used declassified documents to complement and support his interviews. The Defense Department and CIA declassified 5,000 - 4,500 pages of MACV-SOG records for the author. "These records provided a detailed and intimate view of MACV-SOG's plans, programs, and operations. They also contained numerous studies, reports, and assessments of SOG's four operations divisions" (Shultz 2000, xi). Shultz describes how SOG was organized in greater detail than any other source reviewed. He further describes the four principle missions of SOG and evaluates the effectiveness of each. Additionally, he discusses the level of involvement of senior US policy makers at the time (Shultz, 2000, xii).

This book effectively makes the case that officers in SOG's chain of command within each of the four divisions were responsible for four principal missions:

1. Inserting and running agent teams (spies) and creating a complex deception operation that included the manipulation of North Vietnamese POWs.
2. Psychological warfare (psywar) – establishing a fabricated resistance (guerrilla) movement in North Vietnam, kidnapping and indoctrinating North Vietnamese citizens, operating several falsely attributed "black" radio stations, distributing propaganda materials, forging letters and documents, and initiating other dirty tricks.
3. Covert maritime interdiction, capture, and destruction of North Vietnamese naval craft and fishing boats: bombardment of coastal targets; cross-beach commando sabotage raids against military and civilian coastal installations; and the insertion of psywar materials.
4. Cross-border covert reconnaissance operations against the Ho Chi Minh Trail by U.S.-led indigenous teams (Montagnards and Chinese Nungs) to disrupt the movement of North Vietnamese Army supplies and troops by identifying targets

for air strikes, snatching or capturing enemy soldiers, wiretapping lines of communication, and distributing psywar materials. (Shultz 1999, x-xi)

In contrast with Major General Singlaub's *Hazardous Duty*, he excludes the aviation division from his discussion, most likely because integrated aviation was not consistent throughout SOG's existence. However, despite this discrepancy, the analysis and examination of SOG's performance within each of these mission areas is critical to answering the primary thesis question.

The next book in the review is *A Soldier Reports* by General William C. Westmoreland. In his book, General Westmoreland describes his role in Vietnam as a theater commander and highlights his efforts to achieve national strategy objectives and to win the war. He discusses SOG as a unit he supported logistically and highlights the fact that they were not under his authority directly. He further states "every [SOG] action had to be approved in advance by the Secretary of Defense, Secretary of State, and the White House" (Westmoreland 1976, 107). This view agrees with other sources that discussed the SOG chain of command. General Westmoreland also discusses the formulation of overall strategy in Vietnam and how certain decisions were made by the Johnson administration in particular. The book is helpful to the thesis topic because it provides the theater commander's side of the story and highlights his conduct of operational-level warfare in Vietnam. Although SOG did not fall directly under his chain of command, it may be possible to determine whether SOG activities supported his operational goals for the Vietnam War.

John M. Carland's article *Winning the Vietnam War: Westmoreland's Approach in Two Documents* describes two documents that shed further light on General Westmoreland's guidance to subordinate commanders as an operational commander. The

first document, a concept plan, was written by Westmoreland's MACV staff and dated 17 September 1965.

It laid out the necessary conditions for achieving victory and provided to senior American commanders and units practical steps and guidance, presented in a methodical and logical way, to achieve the necessary tactical, operational, and strategic objectives to defeat their Communist adversaries. Moreover, it made clear that when military victories were won, their significance lay in the degree to which they advanced and supported South Vietnam's pacification/nationbuilding program. (Carland 2004, 553)

General Westmoreland's staff issued the second document on 10 December 1965. This document critiqued US military actions at the time and recommended areas for improvement. Of note is the statement "through intelligence developed in operations and from other sources, American commanders had to find better ways to take the fight to the enemy" (Carland 2004, 553). This statement alluding to other sources likely refers to a potential contribution to Westmoreland's operations by SOG. Overall, the article assists the research by detailing Westmoreland's operational guidance during the war.

George C. Herring, in his book *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War*, discusses in detail strategic, operational, and tactical guidance from the President is discussed in detail. This book describes the inner workings of the Johnson administration and explains how military decisions were made. Herring effectively argues "Johnson did not provide clear strategic direction to his military leaders" (Herring 1994, 25). He further makes the case that the Johnson administration built US strategy in Vietnam on the limited war theory that was popular in academic circles at the time. The key personnel in the Johnson administration were veterans of the Cuban missile crisis while serving under President Kennedy. They feared a nuclear exchange if the war in Vietnam was not

limited in scope. With that said, the author describes the micro-management of the Vietnam War by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and President Johnson.

The book discusses the absence of operational and strategic guidance for the war.

Closely related to and to some extent deriving from the absence of strategy was the lack of coordination of the numerous elements of what had become by 1966 a sprawling, multifarious war effort.

The most glaring deficiency is that in an extraordinarily complex war there was no real strategy. (Herring 1994, 178-179)

Herring writes that there was no change of strategy “or even a systematic discussion of strategy” until after the shock of the Tet offensive in 1968 (1994, 179). This book also offers a glimpse of Johnson as an individual and sheds light on his personal convictions as the Commander in Chief (CINC). Johnson as the CINC was an emotional man who cried over casualty figures. His fault was “not from want of trying. He can be more readily faulted for getting too involved in the day-to-day detail of the war, for letting the trees obscure his view of the forest” (1994, 20). The book adds to the thesis by describing the lack of strategic guidance. Previous sources described the chain of command of SOG and the level of involvement of SACSA, Secretary of Defense McNamara, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and others in the White House in the tactical decision making of SOG operations. Based on Herring’s book, it is likely that SOG commanders lacked strategic and operational guidance.

*Vietnam and American Foreign Policy*, edited by John R. Boettiger, is a compilation of writings concerning the Vietnam War. It offers alternative views of effective strategy proposals and insight into the history behind the communist struggle in Vietnam. This book also offers some limited insight from the enemy’s point of view. General Vo Nguyen Giap, North Vietnamese Minister of Defense, stated, “South

Vietnam is the model of the national liberation movement in our time. If the special warfare that the United States imperialists are testing in South Vietnam is overcome, this means that it can be defeated everywhere in the world” (Boettiger 1968, 123).

In his book *On Strategy*, COL Harry G. Summers Jr. effectively argues why the North Vietnamese won the war and why the US lost. His position is best illustrated from the following passages from his work.

But instead of orienting on North Vietnam – the source of the war – we turned our attention to the symptom – the guerrilla war in the south. Our new “strategy” of counterinsurgency blinded us to the fact that the guerrilla war was tactical and not strategic.

How could we have done so well in tactics but failed so miserably in strategy? The answer we postulated then – a failure in strategic military doctrine – manifested itself on the battlefield. Because it did not focus on the political aim to be achieved – containment of North Vietnamese expansion – our so-called strategy was never a strategy at all. At best it could be called a kind of grand tactics.

Our failure as military professionals to judge the true nature of the Vietnam War had a profound effect. It resulted in confusion throughout the national security establishment over tactics, grand tactics and strategy, a confusion that continues to this day. As author and strategist Herbert Y. Schandler commented, “The President had one view, the JCS another, and the field commander had another. (1982, 88-90)

Summers argues that the US failed because they did not direct the war at the correct enemy strategic center of gravity. Furthermore, he lays the blame on the conduct of the war on the political as well as military leadership at the time. His analysis is useful in evaluating strategic and operational goals that the Johnson administration may or may not have communicated to the leadership of SOG because he also argues that the US did not practice operational art. The implications of this work are that the goals of the Johnson and Nixon administrations may have been merely tactical goals with no overall strategic or even operational relevance.



*The Pentagon Papers* were originally taken from a Pentagon study commissioned by Secretary of Defense McNamara as “a major study to determine how and why the US became so deeply involved in Vietnam” (Sheehan 1971, xviii). The copy obtained by *The New York Times* combined with the investigative reporting of Neil Sheehan reveals the inner workings of the Executive branch in making policy decisions concerning Vietnam. This work is useful to the research because it highlights the overall strategy for Vietnam from the Truman administration to Nixon’s administration. There is also some analysis of the utility of the covert war in Vietnam, although the authors lacked much of the classified portions of the Pentagon study concerning covert operations at the time.

*In Retrospect--The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* by Robert S. McNamara is useful to this thesis because it discusses the strategy formulated by the Department of Defense (read by the Secretary of Defense) for waging the fight in Vietnam. In his book, Secretary McNamara argues that the war in Vietnam was without a solution. He also reinforces various assessments of his strategic mindset made by other sources. They argue that he was a believer in limited war theory. This is evident in the following quotation.

Certainly Vietnam taught us how immensely difficult it is to fight limited wars leading to U.S. casualties over long periods of time. But circumstances will arise where limited war is far preferable to unlimited war. Before engaging in such conflicts, the American people must understand the difficulties we will face; the American military must know and accept the constraints under which they will operate; and our leaders – and our people – must be prepared to cut our losses and withdraw if it appears our limited objectives cannot be achieved at acceptable risks or costs. (1995, 331)

Additionally, he concedes numerous failures such as poor management of the war by his staff and the Johnson administration as a whole. He describes inconsistencies in guidance resulting from his poor staff organization. He offers multiple solutions throughout his

book in hindsight to the problems he identified. Other concessions allude to the error of his strategic thinking. Note the following quotation.

I concede with painful candor and a heavy heart that the adage applies to me and to my generation of American leadership regarding Vietnam. Although we sought to do the right thing--and believed we were doing the right thing--in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong. We both overestimated the effect of South Vietnam's loss on the security of the West and failed to adhere to the fundamental principle that, in the final analysis, if the South Vietnamese were to be saved, they had to win the war themselves. Straying from this central truth, we built a progressively more massive effort on an inherently unstable foundation. External military force cannot substitute for the political order and stability that must be forged by a people for themselves. (1995, 333)

Although the author tries to lay the blame on the South Vietnamese, he is also at fault. His comments above imply that he gave SOG Commanders inconsistent guidance during Johnson's administration. The preponderance of other sources agrees that all SOG operations had to be approved by the Secretary of Defense and with the President's knowledge.

The article *McNamara's War Reconsidered* by W. W. Rostow is a critical literature review of Robert McNamara's book *In Retrospect--The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*. This review is useful to this research because Mr. Rostow was a colleague of Secretary of Defense McNamara in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. From 1966 to 1969, he also served as a special assistant to the President. His insight on the veracity of the book is useful. He criticizes McNamara for not addressing such issues as allowing the South Vietnamese guerrillas a sanctuary to train and equip their forces (Rostow 1998, 81).

In the book *Argument Without End* coauthored by Robert S. McNamara, James G. Blight, and Robert K. Brigham, the authors discuss lessons learned from Vietnam. Secretary McNamara responds to criticism of his previous book, *In Retrospect*. In

addition, the authors discuss the formulation of US strategy and analyze incorrect assumptions made during the war. In addition, they discuss in detail enemy courses of action during the Vietnam War drawing in large part on information and comments from high level North Vietnamese officials from the Vietnam War era.

Overall, this is an incredibly useful document, since it includes the answers to numerous questions by former North Vietnamese strategists. Some of their analysis is useful to determine SOG's impact on the enemy during the war. It is also striking that the theme of this book is that the war in Vietnam for the US was not winnable and that political leaders on both sides should have negotiated a peaceful conclusion in 1964. McNamara's conclusion that a favorable peace negotiation was possible in 1964 is well supported by his evidence. However, the idea that the US could not win the war at the time is not. Other writers credibly argue the opposite in other works examined. An example of this is in the next source reviewed.

In his book *Dereliction of Duty*, Major H.R. McMaster takes a critical look at the performance of the strategic leadership of the United States during the Vietnam War. He specifically focuses on the actions of President Lyndon Johnson, Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS). Major McMaster refutes many of the claims made in Robert S. McNamara's book, *In Retrospect*. He discusses the haphazard method of formulating and then providing strategic guidance to the military commanders for the conduct of operations in theater. His work also sheds light on the possible lack of firm guidance to SOG during the Vietnam War. He further notes the importance of limited war theory in the formulation of national strategy by Secretary of

Defense McNamara. The following quote highlights his critique of Johnson and McNamara in the book.

Johnson thought that he would be able to control the US involvement in Vietnam. That belief, based on the strategy of graduated pressure and McNamara's confident assurances, proved in dramatic fashion to be false. If the president was surprised by the consequences of his decisions between November 1963 to July 1965, he should not have been so. He had disregarded the advice he did not want to hear in favor of a policy based on the pursuit of his own political fortunes and his beloved domestic programs. (McMaster 1997, 333)

He further criticizes the actions of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and of the Theater

Commander, General William Westmoreland. This theme is evident in the following quotation.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff became accomplices in the President's deception and focused on a tactical task, killing the enemy. General Westmoreland's "strategy" of attrition in South Vietnam, was, in essence, the absence of strategy. The result was military activity (bombing North Vietnam and killing the enemy in South Vietnam) that did not aim to achieve a clearly defined objective. (1997, 333)

Overall, *Dereliction of Duty* presents an effective argument that there was poor US strategic guidance and planning in Vietnam by senior officials. This theme is also found in other sources reviewed. McMaster also argues that General Westmoreland did not fight the war as an operational commander.

The book *Limited War* by Robert E. Osgood is an argument for the use of Limited War theory during the Cold War. In the following quote, Osgood explains the basic tenets of limited war theory.

The rational use of military power requires a strategy capable of achieving two primary objectives: (a) the deterrence of such major aggression as would cause total war; (b) the deterrence or defeat of lesser aggressions, which could not appropriately be met except by means short of total war. To deter total war, the United States must convince potential aggressors of two things: first, that it can subject them to destruction so massive that they could not possibly gain any worthwhile objective from a total war; second, that it will employ this kind of retaliation against aggressions so threatening as to be equivalent to an attack upon

the United States itself. To deter or defeat lesser aggressions the United States must convince potential aggressors--and demonstrate if necessary--that it is willing and able to conduct effective limited warfare. (1957, 1)

It is important to understand this theory and how it related to the decision making of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations in order to appreciate their use of covert operations in Vietnam. Proponents of this theory arguably value covert, deniable missions such as those conducted by SOG as an important component of limited warfare. Many sources cite Secretary McNamara's desire to apply increasing military pressure on the North Vietnamese in an effort to bring them to a political settlement favorable to US interests.

The article *Presidential Decisionmaking and Vietnam: Lessons for Strategists*, by Joseph R. Cerami examines the use of military force by the president to achieve specific policy objectives in Vietnam. In the article, Cerami looks at the examination of ends, ways, and means with regards to national policy in the pursuit of attaining strategic objectives. "The cases selected occurred at major decision points during the war: Operation Rolling Thunder in 1965, the Cambodian invasion in 1970, and the Easter Offensive and Operation Linebacker in 1972" (Cerami 1996, 66). Each of these cases illustrated the utility of combined arms in trying to achieve political objectives in a challenging political environment. This is useful to an examination of SOG in Vietnam because the article fails to address incorporating unconventional warfare into the combined arms effort.

The next source in the literature is a study by the BDM Corporation titled, *A Study of Strategic Lessons Learned in Vietnam, Volume III – U.S. Foreign Policy and Vietnam, 1945-1975*. The study first illustrates global policy and relates it to US policy in Southeast Asia. Then, the study discusses the "historical precedents and perceptions

expressed as catchwords such as the ‘loss of China’ or ‘appeasement at Munich’, which served to justify or constrain US policy making for Vietnam” (The BDM Corporation 1980, viii). The study also provides various case studies used to describe the policy making process of the Presidential administrations involved. The work adds value because it illuminates the formulation of strategy during the time period. Determining the strategy during Vietnam is crucial to answering the primary research question.

The book *Strategy and Tactics* by Colonel Hoang Ngoc Lung discusses the strategic and operational view of warfare from a South Vietnamese officer’s point of view. COL Lung provides his personal analysis of the North Vietnamese and of the South Vietnamese strategies during the war. He states that the “twofold strategic goal of the North would be (1) to carry on the building of socialism in the North and (2) to start the revolutionary war of liberation in the South” (Lung 1980, 3). He further describes the three stages of North Vietnamese strategy as contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive. The phases would be accomplished with a five-step plan for execution. The first step was increased propaganda activity in South Vietnam. The second step was to organize guerrilla forces and establish base areas inside of South Vietnam. The third step was to have guerilla units begin local attacks. The fourth step was to conduct more offensive attacks and organize regular military forces. The fifth and final step was to conduct a large-scale offensive to seize control of South Vietnam. In Colonel Lung’s estimate, the North Vietnamese were transitioning from step two to step three in 1964 when SOG was formed (Lung 1980, 3-4). The large-scale offensives were conducted in 1968 (Tet), again in 1972, and finally successfully in 1975. Colonel Lung’s work is useful because it describes the enemy’s strategy in detail. Examination of the enemy’s

strategy will aid in discussing the effects of SOG operations from 1964 to 1971 on enemy activities. His work agrees with other US and North Vietnamese sources in this effort regarding North Vietnamese strategy.

In the Rand Corporation Study titled: *1971 and Beyond: The View from Hanoi*, the author Konrad Kellen conducts a detailed analysis of the North Vietnamese government and military strengths and weaknesses. The analysis is useful to the research because it provides an understanding of the nature of the North Vietnamese. The study also discusses the point of view of the common North Vietnamese soldier. The primary argument made by this source is that the greatest asset of the North Vietnamese was the incredibly resilient morale fiber of their forces. This source is valuable because it intimates that North Vietnamese soldiers and civilians in general were not as susceptible as some of the US's prior adversaries to efforts to undermine their morale. Since undermining North Vietnamese morale was the focus of the SOG psychological operations division, this source and the timeframe in which it was written is useful to determine SOG's effectiveness in this area.

In his book *From Enemy to Friend*, the author Bui Tin provides an interesting point of view to the research. Bui Tin was a former NVA Colonel who accepted the final surrender of the South Vietnamese President in Saigon on 30 April 1975. In his work, he answers some pointed questions, such as "what were some other glaring mistakes made by the American side in the management of the war" (Tin 2002, 38). In addition, Colonel Tin suggests strategies that may have been more successful if the South Vietnamese and US governments had followed them. His work also describes indirectly certain enemy responses to some of SOG's operations. Of note, at the time of his book's publication,

Colonel Tin was not welcome in North Vietnam due to the controversial nature of his work and because of his critical statements concerning the North Vietnamese government. Nonetheless, since his work is cited in many of the sources previously reviewed, it deserves consideration.

The sources reviewed in this Chapter are representative of the information available concerning the thesis topic. I purposely chose not to review many other sources because they did not add value to the topic or answer one of the primary, secondary, or tertiary research questions. However, based on the research materials discussed in this chapter, and certain trends noted in the various works, it is possible to organize a methodology to conduct a detailed analysis of the topic.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The thesis topic is examined using the six step historical approach to research.

The approach is defined below.

1. The recognition of a historical problem or the identification of a need for certain historical knowledge
2. The gathering of as much relevant information about the problem or topic as possible
3. If appropriate, the forming of hypothesis that tentatively explains relationships between historical factors
4. The rigorous collection and organization of evidence, and the verification of the authenticity and veracity of information and its sources
5. The selection, organization, and analysis of the most pertinent collected evidence, and the drawing of conclusions
6. The recording of conclusions in a meaningful narrative (Busha 1980, 91)

The first step in this research methodology is to identify a need for certain historical knowledge. This thesis examines the contributions of SOG operations in Vietnam in an effort to draw conclusions concerning the use of a similar military unit in the Global War on Terrorism. As discussed in chapter 1, determining which military resources to use to meet the strategic goal of defeating international terrorists and the nations who sponsor them is a difficult problem. In the past, policy makers faced similar problems in trying to determine how to defeat the communist insurgency in South Vietnam. The US employed a mixture of military units in the prosecution of the conflict. This research will focus on a detailed examination and evaluation of SOG operations

during the Vietnam War. Lessons learned from their use in Vietnam may apply to operations conducted by their modern-day equivalents.

The second step in the historical approach to research is to gather as much relevant information about the problem or topic as possible. Sources concerning the utility of SOG include numerous books, articles, government studies, declassified military documents, and personal interviews. The relevant information for the thesis can be placed in one or more of three broad categories. The first category is US strategy in Vietnam. Twenty-two of the sources cited in the research fit in this category. Of these, two are from personal interviews with former SOG veterans and authors of books used in the research. Three are from government documents in microfiche format. Three are from articles, thirteen are from books, and one is from a government study concerning strategy.

The second category of research material is enemy strategy and responses to US efforts during the war. One study, one article, ten books and two interviews contain information that fits into this category. The third category is SOG specific information. The research includes one article, nine books and two interviews that discuss SOG operations in various levels of detail.

The third step in the historical method of research involves forming a hypothesis that tentatively explains relationships between historical factors. In this case, the hypothesis is that SOG did not contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort. The four assumptions made for this effort are:

(1) The significant contribution of using SOG forces can be measured by discovering whether or not they accomplished their objectives and assessing how their actions impacted the enemy.

(2) A comparison of the relative worth of achieving stated objectives versus losing soldiers' lives is feasible merely through examination of casualty figures versus mission success rates.

(3) Enough reliable data in the unclassified realm exists upon which to accurately base findings.

(4) Lessons learned or insights gained concerning covert and clandestine operations from Vietnam may apply to current operations in the GWOT.

The fourth step in the historical method of research is the rigorous collection and organization of evidence, and the verification of the authenticity and veracity of the information and its sources. As previously discussed, the research is organized into the three broad categories of US strategy, enemy strategy, and SOG specific information. Of the sources utilized, thirteen are from persons who had first-hand knowledge of the events detailed in their works. This increases the likelihood that the information is authentic, though perhaps biased. Additionally, many sources report the same historical events, but from different viewpoints. Douglas Valentine's *The Phoenix Program* reported SOG tactics in Vietnam from a morally critical viewpoint. On the other hand, authors John Plaster and John Singlaub discussed SOG activities from a professional viewpoint, although their points of view are perhaps biased by their loyalty to their former unit. Different viewpoints in the research contribute to the determination of veracity as well as research objectivity.

The fifth step is the selection, organization, and analysis of the most pertinent evidence, and the drawing of conclusions. The analysis will confirm or deny the hypothesis. The primary question this thesis aims to answer is--did Studies and

Observation Group (SOG) covert and clandestine operations contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort? The analysis will focus first on the US strategic goals in Vietnam and whether or not SOG contributed to achieving those strategic goals. Discussion will span the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations, with particular focus on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations due to their relevance to SOG.

The analysis will also attempt to show MACV's operational goals during the war and discuss the impact of their operations on the enemy. An attempt will be made to demonstrate SOG's linkage to the MACV operational goals. An analysis of the success or failure of SOG's four major operational divisions will answer the question of tactical success or failure. At this point, it will be possible to draw conclusions (the final step in the historical approach to research) concerning the significance of SOG's contribution as a military force in the Vietnam War.

Of additional note, three principles guided the conduct of this historical research. First, consider the biases of the sources of information. Second, multiple factors can contribute to historical events. Third, examine the topic from multiple viewpoints when possible (Busha 1980, 99). In most cases, multiple sources of information about the same events helped form a more objective picture.

## CHAPTER 4

### ANALYSIS

This chapter will present the evidence gathered from the research and provide analysis. As stated earlier, SOG did not contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort. In order to substantiate this claim, it is necessary to describe the development of US strategy in Vietnam along with the evolution and purpose of SOG. A discussion of North Vietnamese strategy will contrast the opposing viewpoint and highlight some of the overall miscalculations by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations concerning enemy intentions. Evidence will show that these miscalculations led to strategic blunders and debilitating limitations to SOG activities. Analysis of the lack of US operational warfare by the military leadership and its impact on SOG proves critical to determining whether or not SOG could even accomplish their goals. An examination of the tactical results of the SOG divisions will further illuminate the unit's record of success and failure. At this point, the analysis will answer the question of whether or not SOG covert and clandestine operations accomplished strategic, operational, and tactical goals in the Vietnam War. Finally, the thesis will consider evidence that describes the impact of SOG missions on enemy forces and their operations as another criterion to determine the utility of SOG in Vietnam.

The US strategy in Vietnam for purposes of this thesis starts with the Kennedy administration. On 28 January 1961 President Kennedy convened his first National Security Council meeting to discuss the Vietnam situation. He received a briefing from Air Force Brigadier General Edward Lansdale who was an "experienced clandestine

operator for the Central Intelligence Agency” (Shultz 1999, 1). This individual, an Office of Strategic Services (OSS) veteran from World War II, ran a highly successful counterinsurgency operation against the communist Huks in the Phillipines in the early 1950s (1999, 2). From 1954 to 1956, he was assigned to Vietnam after the French defeat by the Eisenhower administration “to plan and execute a campaign of covert warfare against the new communist regime in Hanoi” (1999, 2). This effort later proved a dismal failure. In January 1961, he returned to Vietnam to conduct a fact-finding visit concerning the situation in Vietnam prior to Kennedy’s first National Security Council briefing.

General Landsdale briefed the President that the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong would defeat South Vietnam unless the South Vietnamese government changed tactics. He stated that “counterguerrilla forces and civic reform programs were needed to defeat the VC [Viet Cong] and win the support and loyalty of the peasants” (1999, 2). His recommendation endorsed the counterinsurgency plan crafted by the US embassy in Saigon. However, the plan did not include actions to be taken against North Vietnam to discourage their support for the Viet Cong. An adherent to limited war theory, President Kennedy stated that he “wanted guerrillas to operate in the North” in order to pressure the North Vietnamese government to stop fomenting the war in the South (1999, 3). With this statement, Kennedy started the US covert action campaign in Vietnam (1999, 3).

In order to analyze the Kennedy administration’s policy on Vietnam it is important to understand the differences between limited war theory and the theory of massive retaliation. President Kennedy, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and President Johnson were all proponents of the limited war theory. This theory was an academic

response by Robert Osgood to the Eisenhower administration's policy of massive retaliation or total war. Total war involved using the full use of America's conventional and nuclear arsenal for any war-like act by a belligerent state. The policy of the Eisenhower administration is best summed up by the following quote from Osgood's book.

Summing up the import of Dulles' [Eisenhower's Secretary of State] address of January 12, 1954, we may reasonably conclude that the administration intended to rely primarily upon the implicit threat of massive nuclear retaliation against strategic targets in the Soviet Union in order to deter aggression in Europe but that it would rely upon clear advance warnings of conventional or nuclear air retaliation against selected military targets not necessarily within the area of attack in order to deter direct Chinese Communist aggression in Asia. (1957, 212)

In the minds of the younger generation, the academics at the time, and more importantly the key players in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, this policy was not flexible enough for US foreign policy (Herring 1994, 5). They believed Eisenhower's policy had already allowed North Vietnam to fall to the Communists in 1954 since using massive air strikes or nuclear weapons against North Vietnam or their Communist allies was out of the question (Osgood 1957, 225). Limited war theory offered an alternative for some of the weaknesses inherent in massive retaliation. Limited war theory proposed that using military force to achieve limited political objectives would induce belligerent nations to negotiate settlements favorable to US interests. "Limited war must be directed by the civilian leadership. The special needs of the military should not affect its conduct, and indeed the military must be a controllable instrument of national policy" (Herring 1994, 4).

The debate over whether limited war is more favorable than total war continues and is a topic for further research regarding its modern day applications in the Global

War on Terrorism. Some authors in the research, such as Harry Summers in *On Strategy*, seem to argue for the total war theory in Vietnam despite his not advocating the use of nuclear weapons (Summers 1982, 16). His hypothesis is that the US government and military, enamoured with the counterinsurgency, failed to fight an operational level war in Vietnam against the conventional army of North Vietnam. On the other hand, other sources in this effort convincingly argue that limited war theory was and still is an effective alternative (Osgood 1957, 139). These sources imply that the government must control the type and scope of military operations in order to avoid a larger, more costly war. Unconventional warfare units such as SOG seem peculiarly suited to conducting selected limited war missions due to their flexibility and covert nature. The problem in applying the limited war theory to Vietnam is that the policy makers never truly understood their enemy. It was not possible to apply the correct amount of military pressure to the North Vietnamese because they never knew what pressure was required.

In the early stages of the covert operations campaign from 1961 to 1963, the CIA took the lead. CIA efforts included operations conducted inside South Vietnam and those directed against North Vietnam. Research concerning CIA covert action operations at the time shows that the emphasis of the Agency was placed on operations within the borders of South Vietnam, despite President Kennedy's earlier guidance concerning fomenting a guerilla movement in North Vietnam. In the south, covert action operations fell into the categories of political action, paramilitary, and counterterror (Valentine 1990, 45).

In North Vietnam, the CIA programs consisted of infiltrating agent teams and individual agents by aircraft or by boat to collect intelligence. They also conducted psychological warfare utilizing radio broadcasts, leaflet drops, gift-kit airdrops, and



maritime assault operations against North Vietnamese coastal targets. Additionally, they created a “notional resistance movement” (Shultz 1999, 18). However, there was no actual resistance movement and the CIA station chief was reluctant to start one. The following quote describes the CIA’s early lack of progress.

William Colby, CIA’s chief of station in South Vietnam at the time, was instrumental in constraining covert action against the North because he believed a large effort there would consume CIA resources needed for the operations inside South Vietnam. (Shultz 1999, 44)

At the time, North Vietnam was considered an extremely difficult target due to the “paranoid” nature of the regime (1999, 14). Significant resources would have been necessary to get a resistance movement started. A majority of the dissatisfied personnel necessary to start a movement had already fled to South Vietnam in a massive exodus in 1954 when the Communists took control of North Vietnam after the signing of the Geneva accords. North Vietnamese internal security cadre proved highly effective with regards to eliminating internal threats. During his covert operations against North Vietnam in 1954, General Landsdale sent a small number of paramilitary guerillas north, but all were eliminated. Compared to Ho Chi Minh’s 50,000 Viet Minh who remained in South Vietnam to form the Viet Cong, US efforts in the North were miniscule (Lung 1980, 2).

By 1963, the CIA’s performance was not of the scale that President Kennedy envisioned. He saw counterinsurgency and unconventional warfare as an important foreign policy tool and he wanted to be able to conduct operations on a scale not seen since the days of the OSS in World War II. National Security Action Memorandums “(NSAMs) 55, 56, and 57 illustrated Kennedy’s dissatisfaction with the CIA and his determination to use DOD assets to develop the operational means to conduct

unconventional warfare against North Vietnam and other denied areas” (Shultz 1999, 21). NSAM 55 “eliminated exclusive CIA authority over planning and executing covert paramilitary operations” (Shultz 1999, 19). NSAM 56 amounted to conducting an exhaustive inventory of the covert paramilitary units in the US military and CIA inventory in order to determine deficiencies that would be rectified by additional DOD assets (1999, 20). “NSAM 57 stated that any large paramilitary operation wholly or partially covert which requires significant numbers of military trained personnel, [and] amounts of military equipment” will be the responsibility of the DOD (1999, 21). The debate over whether or not the CIA or DOD should control paramilitary operations continues today.

The Pentagon’s response to the President’s desire for DOD to have a greater role in conducting paramilitary operations was to form the office of the Special Assistant for Counterinsurgency and Special Activities (SACSA) to provide oversight of unconventional warfare operations. Unfortunately, few among the Pentagon leadership were proponents of unconventional warfare (1999, 338). Most had no experience with it and saw it as a passing fancy. This applied as well to the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), which was formed by Secretary of Defense McNamara on 8 February 1962 to coordinate operational level missions as a sub-unified command under the Commander in Chief, Pacific (1999, 23). The lack of senior officer experience and/or enthusiasm for conducting unconventional warfare missions hampered SOG efforts throughout the unit’s existence. Additionally, numerous tactical failures within SOG resulted from the inexperience of leaders assigned to the unit.

The DOD formulated OPLAN 34A, also called Operation Switchback, in 1963 to take control of paramilitary operations in Vietnam (1999, 31). The plan's goals, reflecting the national strategy were "to inflict increasing punishment upon North Vietnam and to create pressures, which may convince the North Vietnamese leadership, in its own self interest, to desist from its aggressive policies" (1999, 38). Initial CIA and MACV planners proposed five broad categories of operations to accomplish these goals over a one-year period. The first was intelligence collection. The second concerned psychological operations aimed at harassing the North Vietnamese population and leadership while supporting the formation of a resistance movement. The third involved sabotage of critical North Vietnamese facilities to increase political pressure on North Vietnam. The fourth involved creating a resistance movement in North Vietnam. The fifth category included maritime raids, reconnaissance with coordinated aerial attacks, and airborne raids directed against North Vietnamese critical targets (1999, 38). Under the original plan, the utility of a large paramilitary unit like SOG conducting unconventional warfare operations against North Vietnam seemed incredibly useful in the context of fighting a limited war.

After President Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson ordered OPLAN 34A reviewed by the chief of SACSA to "select from it those actions of least risk" (1999, 39). This change in presidential leadership was crucial to the US covert operations strategy in Vietnam. Of the 72 types of operations recommended by OPLAN34A, only 33 were approved by the Johnson administration (1999, 40). President Kennedy was a strong proponent of unconventional warfare who wanted to aggressively pursue actions against the North Vietnamese to change their policy of supporting the South Vietnamese

insurgency. The lack of results and inability to mount large-scale operations was the reason the CIA lost control of paramilitary operations in Vietnam. When President Johnson took over, his first appraisal of the plan demonstrated trepidation instead of boldness of action, although his foreign policy objective of pressuring the North Vietnamese was the same as President Kennedy's. Furthermore, his overall strategic objective for what covert operations should achieve did not change until after the Tet offensive in 1968.

SOG formed under OPLAN34A on 24 January 1964 to conduct unconventional warfare operations against North Vietnam with the strategic goal of influencing North Vietnam to stop fomenting the Viet Cong resistance in South Vietnam (1999, 39). Unfortunately for SOG, President Johnson's trepidation hampered the unit's ability to accomplish the strategic goals President Kennedy had envisioned. In the next few paragraphs, it is important to the research to discuss North Vietnamese strategy to better analyze the decisions of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations that ultimately affected SOG operations. As implied earlier, certain invalid assumptions concerning the enemy and the intentions of their Soviet and Chinese allies are at the root of the US failure in Vietnam.

On 20 July 1954, the Geneva Accords divided North and South Vietnam at the 17th parallel. The North adopted Communism and the South adopted a nationalist government in which pluralism and free enterprise were encouraged. A general election was scheduled in 1956 to reunify the country. When the South Vietnamese rejected the 1956 general election, the North Vietnamese protested diplomatically (Lung 1980, 2). They were able to do little else since they were recovering economically and militarily

from their war with the French, which was fought mostly on North Vietnamese soil. In the two years after the war, North Vietnam's primary focus was on rebuilding their country and consolidating power.

In South Vietnam, the 50,000 communist cadre personnel left behind in 1954 were expected to solidify their communist base and wait for North Vietnamese orders. During the Tet New Year celebration of 1957, Ho Chi Minh explained his strategy to his southern political cadres.

To build a long-lasting building, we must lay a solid foundation. The North is the foundation, the taproot of the struggle to liberate and re-unify our country. Therefore, what we are doing in the North is for the purpose of strengthening both North and South. Thus, our work here is like the struggle in the South, for the South, and for all Vietnam. (Lung 1980, 2)

In 1959, only 10,000 Communist cadre in South Vietnam were as the result of South Vietnamese counterinsurgency efforts and disenchantment with the Communist cause. At that time, the Central Executive Committee of the Workers' Communist Party of North Vietnam met and decided to liberate South Vietnam (1980, 2). One critical component of their strategy was to secure an infiltration route to move additional Communist cadre personnel and supplies south. The North Vietnamese Army established Group 559 "with the mission of directing and supporting the infiltration of men, weapons, ammunition and explosives into the South" (1980, 2). This route later became known as the Ho Chi Minh Trail.

The "twofold strategic goal of the North would be (1) to carry on the building of socialism in the North and (2) to start the revolutionary war of liberation in the South" (Lung 1980, 3). The three stages of North Vietnamese strategy were ones of contention, equilibrium, and counteroffensive. The contention stage is largely defensive where

guerrilla warfare against government installations is the dominating tactic. During equilibrium, the guerillas are as powerful as the government forces, but chose to remain on the strategic defensive, preparing for the counteroffensive by continuing harassing attacks. The counteroffensive stage is a conventional mobile assault with guerrilla forces in a supporting role (Lung 1980, 3).

The phases would be accomplished through a five-step plan for execution. The first step was increased propaganda activity in South Vietnam. The second step was to organize guerrilla forces and establish base areas inside of South Vietnam. The third step was to have guerilla units begin local attacks. The fourth step was to conduct more offensive attacks and organize regular military forces. The fifth and final step was to conduct a large-scale offensive to seize control of South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese were transitioning from step two to step three in 1964 (Lung 1980, 3-4). The large-scale offensives in step five were conducted first in 1968 (Tet), again in 1972, and finally successfully in 1975.

The Kennedy and Johnson administrations apparently assumed that the North Vietnamese would stop with step three. This is evident in the US national strategy already discussed, which only addresses the guerrilla insurgency issue. On the other hand, there were some advisors who apparently did understand the nature of the war. If their advice had been followed, perhaps strategic guidance would have countered the North Vietnamese strategy more effectively. One advisor who correctly surmised the nature of the war was Walt W. Rostow, chairman of the State Department's Policy Planning Council for Secretary of State Rusk. In *The Pentagon Papers*, Rostow described a compelling strategy in his memorandum *Victory and Defeat in Guerrilla Wars*, dated

20 May 1965. He stated that in order for the communist guerrillas to win in Vietnam, they needed to succeed in one of four routes to victory.

Mao Stage Three: going to all-out conventional war and winning as in China in 1947-49.

Political collapse and takeover: North Vietnam;

Political collapse and a coalition government in which the Communists get control over the security machinery; army and/or police. This has been an evident Viet Cong objective in this [war].

Converting the bargaining pressure generated by the guerrilla forces into a partial victory by splitting the country: Laos. Also, in a sense, North Vietnam in 1954 and the Irish Rebellion after the First World War. (Sheehan 1971, 447)

He said that in order for the US and South Vietnamese to succeed, they should block all four routes to victory and impress on the North Vietnamese through increasing military force that they would not be able to succeed and that time would not better their situation. The actual North Vietnamese strategy shows that their strategic emphasis was on preparing for Mao Stage Three. Therefore, it follows that if the US had blocked all the steps listed above, they could have achieved their objectives in Vietnam.

Two of the enemy's centers of gravity mentioned in the North Vietnamese strategy were North Vietnam's internal security and their infiltration route to move personnel and supplies south (Lung 1980, 2). Other centers of gravity in the theater could arguably be the NVA conventional forces and the Viet Cong guerrillas. Summers' work *On Strategy* argues convincingly that destroying the conventional warfare capabilities of the North Vietnamese instead of just focusing on the Viet Cong would have made conducting a large-scale offensive in the Mao Stage Three impossible (Summers 1982, 85). In SOG's case, their four main divisions eventually focused their tactical efforts on

the first two centers of gravity mentioned (Shultz 1999, xiv). Other divisions in SOG provided tactical support for those divisions.

Strategically, the overriding goal of SOG under OPLAN34A mirrored the US strategic goal, which was to cause North Vietnam to stop fomenting the war in South Vietnam. To accomplish this goal, the US should have targeted all four of the enemy centers of gravity mentioned above and achieved effects that would have caused the North Vietnamese to reconsider their strategy. Operationally, there were never identified goals for SOG. However, SOG indirectly focused their unconventional warfare efforts on denying the enemy the use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail and destabilizing North Vietnam's internal security. These should have been the stated operational goals that were indirectly alluded to in OPLAN 34A. Although it never happened, SOG's operational goals should have been tied to the conventional force operational goals in 1965 when large US conventional units deployed to Vietnam.

One of General Westmoreland's Headquarters MACV directives dated 17 September 1965 discusses his operational strategy for winning in Vietnam. It demonstrates that his sole focus was on the Viet Cong and not on all four of the enemy centers of gravity mentioned.

The strategy to be followed by the GVN (South Vietnamese Government) and US forces in defeating the VG (VC) and facilitating GVN control over the country consists of three successive steps:

1. First, to halt the VG (VC) offensive-to stem the tide.
2. Second, to resume the offensive-to destroy VG (VC) and pacify selected high priority areas.
3. Third, to restore progressively the entire country to the control of the GVN. (Carland 2004, 24)



Mission analysis of SOG's requirements to achieve their two indirect operational goals leads one to conclude that SOG did not have the assets to accomplish either of their goals well. This will become more evident in the tactical discussion of each division. Later analysis will also show the challenges SOG faced when trying to form their organization and start unconventional warfare operations. Further analysis will show that certain limitations placed on SOG tactics should have changed in order to achieve the desired effects. The restriction of not being able to foment a real insurgency in North Vietnam was a common theme in multiple works in the research concerning SOG. Equally debilitating were limitations placed on SOG by the State Department concerning cross border operations directed against the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia.

Several decisions by the Kennedy and Johnson administrations blocked SOG's early efforts to effectively target the enemy's two centers of gravity. The Kennedy administration's policy of allowing the US ambassadors of each country the ability to approve, modify, or disapprove of paramilitary operations in their countries proved to be a bureaucratic impediment that sabotaged the unconventional warfare unity of effort throughout the war (Shultz 1999, 214). This problem was never rectified by subsequent presidential administrations and is still being debated today, a topic for further research due to its implications on the Global War on Terrorism.

As an example, SOG led forces could not penetrate Laos until the fall of 1965, almost fifteen months after the unit was formed. Furthermore, after these operations were finally approved, US Ambassador to Laos Sullivan limited SOG operations to within a few kilometers over the border and restricted the use of US aircraft. Throughout SOG's existence, Ambassador Sullivan hampered SOG's efforts against the Ho Chi Minh Trail

(1999, 215). Later in 1967 SOG was allowed to operate against the trail in Cambodia. However, operations in Cambodia were even more limited than those in Laos were (1999, 237). What is evident is that the goals of the State Department were never linked with the goals of the other players in the region. Presidential leadership should have provided unity of effort in the region. Unfortunately, nothing in the research shows this happened.

The second debilitating restriction was imposed by the Johnson administration. This was the decision not to start a resistance movement in North Vietnam. The OPLAN 34A planners saw this as a critical component of creating instability in the North Vietnamese rear area (Shultz 1999, 57). According to numerous sources in the research, the Johnson administration believed the assumption that if the US had started an insurgency in North Vietnam with the goal of overthrowing the government, it would have caused either the Chinese or Russians to enter the war on behalf of their Communist allies (1999, 98). This assumption seems invalid. The Eisenhower administration tried it in 1954 with General Landsdale. The Chinese or Russians did not intervene then. What strategic conditions changed that would have caused them to intervene seven years later? Full analysis of the invalid assumptions about the Russians and Chinese is a topic for further research. Suffice it to say that the decision made it incredibly difficult to destabilize the North Vietnamese rear area and thus accomplish SOG's operational goals outlined in OPLAN 34A.

Numerous authors used in the research argue that the US never waged an operational level warfare campaign in Vietnam. In order to frame this statement in the proper context, it is important to review the definition used in this effort.

Operational level of war. The level of war at which campaigns and major operations are planned, conducted, and sustained to accomplish strategic objectives within theaters or operational areas. Activities at this level link tactics and strategy by establishing operational objectives needed to accomplish the strategic objectives, sequencing events to achieve the operational objectives, initiating actions, and applying resources to bring about and sustain these events. These activities imply a broader dimension of time or space than do tactics; they ensure the logistic and administrative support of tactical forces, and provide the means by which tactical successes are exploited to achieve strategic objectives. (Joint Publication 1-02 2001, 389)

From this definition and earlier statements made in the research, SOG was given the job of leading the unconventional warfare campaign against North Vietnam by the President when he approved OPLAN34A. Johnson's restrictions on operations did not lessen the responsibility of the military organization for the conduct of the unconventional warfare campaign. He only made it more difficult to achieve their objectives by the tactical constraints he imposed.

However, it is not the purpose of this effort to focus on the lack of an overall operational warfare plan in Vietnam. It is readily apparent that the goals of the State Department, other government agencies, conventional military, and unconventional military were never linked. They did not support each other in a unified effort. Every source reviewed concerning Vietnam agrees on this point. On the other hand, it is important to judge whether or not SOG accomplished their implied operational goals even if these goals were never formally stated. The answer is they did not. They never cut off the Ho Chi Minh Trail and they never caused significant instability in the North Vietnamese rear area.

The remainder of the analysis will focus on the tactical performance of each main SOG division. Analysis will further highlight some of the tactical challenges the unit faced. One of the challenges already mentioned was the lack of enthusiasm for

unconventional warfare in the senior military leadership at the time. The following quote is illustrative of this.

General Lemnitzer, chairman of the JCS from 1960 to 1962, stated that the new administration was 'oversold' on the importance of guerrilla warfare. Likewise, General George Decker, Army chief of staff from 1960 to 1962, countered a presidential lecture to the JCS on counterinsurgency with the reply, 'Any good soldier can handle guerrillas.' Their attitude toward unconventional warfare was similar. (Shultz 1999, 51)

This attitude led to a lack of support during the unit's formation, which hampered initial tactical operations. The first mistake by the DOD and SACSA was to assign a Colonel as the Chief of SOG. This rank discrepancy seems unusual given the sensitivity, scope and importance of the unconventional warfare campaign to President Kennedy.

For example, the commander of the conventional forces ground campaign (MACV) was a US Army General. His Corps Commanders were Lieutenant Generals and his Division Commanders were Major Generals. SOG's unconventional warfare forces were the size of an Army Division and combined joint and multinational forces (Singlaub 1991, 292). This rank structure ensured that SOG considerations would not be integrated into the overall conventional plan to any great degree. It was evident that the senior leadership was comfortable relegating the entire unconventional warfare campaign to a Colonel, as if the unit was of no more importance than a Brigade (Shultz 1999, 51).

Since the war was not fought operationally, early commanders found themselves focusing on tactics and trying to get approval for missions through a convoluted bureaucratic process. This process virtually eliminated the ability of the unit to conduct flexible operations. The following quote from an interview with John Plaster illustrates Colonel Russel's early dilemma in trying to decide what operations to do despite his numerous restrictions (Colonel Russel was the first Commander of SOG).

He [Col Russel] was told not to consider, not to wait, not to analyze. He was told to execute. These were operations dictated by Washington, which were approved individually at White House, State Department and DOD Secretary of Defense level. It was further complicated by the fact that because these were individually weighed and approved and often modified, he would send forth this list of targets saying 'well, we could be prepared to execute this mission by the first of July'. It would take so long to teletype it back to Washington by secure means. By the time it was hand carried through the White House and the State Department and the Department of Defense, and meanwhile perhaps there was an objection of some kind where a need to modify placed a requirement placed on top of it, well then it had to be resubmitted. If there ever was an opportunity, quite frankly it passed. It was too late but they were still compelled to execute. (Plaster 2005)

Despite the process, SOG operations strove for success in each of their compartmentalized divisions. However, some were more successful than others.

Major General Singlaub, the third Commander of SOG, describes the organization of his unit aligned by operational function. "The unit's functional arm, the Operations Staff Directorate, was divided into five numbered divisions; Op-31 through Op-35" (1991, 295). In the next few pages, the research will discuss the covert maritime division, the aviation division, the psychological operations division, the agent insertion and deception division, and the cross border reconnaissance division.

Op-31 was the staff division that supervised our maritime operations, conducted by the Naval Advisory Detachment (NAD) at Danang. This group ran a variety of seaborne operations, including the training and support for the Vietnamese Coastal Survey Service, which was actually a raiding, sabotage, and intelligence force. NAD had a small fleet of high speed, low-slung Norwegian-built wooden torpedo boats, hard to detect on radar. (Singlaub 1991, 295)

From 1964 to 1969, the covert maritime division conducted numerous covert operations, the most famous of which contributed to the Gulf of Tonkin incident in August 1964. After SOG's initial formation in January 1964, Secretary of Defense McNamara was eager to strike North Vietnamese targets and increase pressure on the Communists to stop fomenting the insurgency. Colonel Russel, with guidance from

McNamara, selected the maritime division as the first SOG unit to strike targets in North Vietnam. The division had five Norwegian Nasty class gunboats purchased by the DOD. Unfortunately, in order to preserve deniability, no US personnel were allowed on the missions. This decision hampered the unit's ability to operate successfully on numerous occasions.

Furthermore, the level of training and leadership capabilities of the South Vietnamese mercenaries who carried out the maritime missions were not at the level needed to conduct covert operations in hostile territory. To counter this deficiency, the CIA hired Norwegian boat captains for SOG to lead the newly trained Vietnamese Coastal Survey force. The US trainers for the mercenary force were from the Naval Advisory Detachment (NAD). US personnel included personnel from Detachment Echo, SEAL Team One, Boat Support Unit One, and USMC Force Reconnaissance advisors (Plaster 2000, 19).

The first attack on 16 February 1964 used the Nasty boats in conjunction with the South Vietnamese Sea Commandos to target a North Vietnamese bridge. The attack failed when they came under heavy fire. Later, they attacked the bridge again with demolition swimmers and lost eight men. After that, they trained for an additional three months before their next attack. On 12 June 1964, they successfully damaged a storage area and barracks 100 miles north of the demilitarized zone (2000, 20). During the next two months, they raided numerous targets in North Vietnam with success. On 30 July 1964, they used all five boats to strike radar sites on Hon Me and Hon Ngu. Two days later, North Vietnamese boats attacked the US destroyer *Maddox* near Hon Me. On 3 August 1964, the SOG boats attacked another radar site and base facility which

precipitated a second enemy counterattack on the US warships *Maddox* and *Turner Joy* (2000, 21). In response to the counterattacks by the North Vietnamese, the US issued the *Gulf of Tonkin Resolution*, which gave President Johnson the ability to broaden the US military effort in Vietnam.

In subsequent years, the division accomplished numerous tactical missions in North Vietnamese waters using its South Vietnamese mercenaries. In 1965 “MACV opined that the marops program was ‘the most productive of all 34A programs ... and the most lucrative from the viewpoint of accomplishments’” (Shultz 1999, 192). However, none of the sabotage missions had a significant impact on the enemy’s strategy for the war. They merely caused the North Vietnamese to beef up their coastal defenses and move critical assets farther north. After the Tet offensive in 1968, the boats were prohibited by the Johnson administration from going into North Vietnamese waters. This ended their usefulness in meeting SOG’s OPLAN 34A objectives. As a side note, after 1968 they continued to contribute tactically to the overall war effort by conducting US led raids on enemy forces in South Vietnam (1999, 201).

Other missions conducted by the maritime division supported the efforts of the psychological operations division and the resistance and intelligence operations division. In this capacity, they conducted numerous missions to drop off packages and seize North Vietnamese fisherman to support the deception operations of Op 33 and 34. These support operations contributed to the SOG operational mission of creating instability in the North Vietnamese rear area. During 1968, Hanoi showed its concern by launching a major counterespionage campaign to counter SOG operations. In summary, the maritime

division's support of the deception and psychological operations was arguably their greatest tactical achievement during the unconventional war effort (1999, 193).

Op 32 was the division that supervised the SOG air force. SOG aircraft were based at Nha Trang in South Vietnam and at two airfields in Thailand. They also had their own separate airfield at Bienhoa, northeast of Saigon. Their forces were modified as SOG tactics evolved during SOG's seven-year existence. In 1964, SOG had six modified C-123s known as the First Flight Detachment for agent and supply drops in support of Op 33 and 34. (Plaster 2000, 71). All aircraft were flown without any identifying markings linking them to the US. Additionally, these aircraft "were flown by Chinese air force pilots from Taiwan, who rotated regularly in and out of Vietnam" (Plaster 1991, 295).

In 1968, SOG received six specially modified C-130s that were co-located with the C-123s in Nha Trang, South Vietnam. They were known as the 15th Air Commando Squadron in 1968 and later as the 90th SOS in 1970. Their tactical use of the new forward-looking infrared (FLIR) system enabled them to see enemy forces surrounding compromised agent teams during re-supply drops which confirmed Op 33 suspicions (Plaster 2000, 74). Only one of the C-123s or C-130s was lost over North Vietnam despite hundreds of missions penetrating enemy territory. On 28 December 1967, one C-130 (Blackbird Crew S-01) was lost about a dozen miles south of the Yunnan Province, China. The eleven USAF personnel on the mission are still listed as Missing in Action (2000, 85).

SOG also had a sizable helicopter force throughout SOG's existence. Organically, they had the 219th South Vietnamese Helicopter Squadron with fifteen H-34s known as the Kingbees and the 20th Special Operations Squadron (SOS), USAF. The 20th SOS,



nick-named The Green Hornets was equipped with numerous CH-3s and later UH-1s in 1967. These helicopter units pioneered many of the insertion, extraction, air assault, and aerial gunnery operations which special operations aviators use today. From 1966 to 1968, part of the 20th Squadron moved to Nakhon Phanom Air Base in Thailand and was known as the 21st SOS. This element flew CH-3s in support of SOG operations as well as CIA operations in Laos (2000, 104). Additional helicopter assets were assigned by order of General Westmoreland on a case by case basis. However, this method proved inefficient due to the demanding flight profiles of the missions. By 1970, attached Army and Marine helicopter units were tasked to support SOG operations long enough to learn the proper tactics, techniques, and procedures to improve their survival rates (2000, 87).

For fixed wing fire support, Colonel Singlaub “cemented” a special arrangement with the Seventh Air Force in early 1967 (2000, 111). Whenever a SOG reconnaissance team called “Prairie Fire! Prairie Fire!” on the radio, they would have priority for all the fighter-bombers over Laos and North Vietnam (2000, 111). Once the fighters arrived, Air Force Forward Air Controllers (FACs) controlled them. These FACs who supported SOG during daylight hours flew with former SOG Reconnaissance leaders on board. The combination of combat experienced aviators and experienced SOG reconnaissance men resulted in excellent air support for teams in trouble (2000, 112). For other support missions, an airborne C-130 command and control bird flying above southern Laos would divert bombing assets to SOG teams whenever they found targets of opportunity along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos and Cambodia (2000, 111).

The final air element that supported SOG was the S.P.A.F (Sneaky Pete Air Force) or 4th Platoon, 219th Army Aviation Company. They flew OV-1 single engine

spotter planes on leader's reconnaissance missions for SOG. Overall, for the most part, the aviation forces demonstrated the necessity for organic aviation units assigned to a unit like SOG. Furthermore, the higher training level requirement for aviators to conduct unconventional warfare operations for SOG was critical to mission success rates. During the war, SOG aviation units developed tactics and many new techniques that were later refined over the years and are used now by special operations aviation units today.

Op 33 supervised the psychological operations conducted by SOG. This division specialized in ingenious deceptions that ranged from counterfeit North Vietnamese currency to the construction of an elaborate "notional" sham resistance movement known as the Sacred Sword of the Patriot. The primary mission of Op-33 was to foster and exploit discontent among the North Vietnamese military and civilians. (Singlaub 1991, 296)

This division encountered numerous hurdles during its initial formation. First, Colonel Russell had trouble getting the number and type of personnel assigned to the unit. He originally requested 150 military personnel and 31 CIA officers. He received only 110 military personnel and 13 CIA officers. Later in 1966, the CIA reduced its cadre to nine. Despite pushing the issue through SACSA, he was never able rectify this situation. The second issue was the lack of psychological warfare training of the personnel assigned. Few military personnel had any training or experience conducting the type of complex psychological warfare operation they were being asked to conduct. Most had to learn on the job if at all (Shultz 1999, 132-133).

As the division evolved, the psychological operations group was organized into four subdivisions: "research and analysis, printed media, forgeries, and black mail; radios; and special projects" (1999, 135). The first three are self-explanatory. Black mail consisted of fake letters attributed to loyal North Vietnamese personnel in order to bring

suspicion on them from the North Vietnamese counterintelligence personnel. The special projects subdivision included the fake resistance movement, the Sacred Sword of the Patriot League (SSPL). This subdivision maintained an island below the 17th parallel that was purportedly in North Vietnam territory by its inhabitants. The inhabitants were all actors living in a fake coastal village in South Vietnamese waters called Paradise Island. North Vietnamese fishermen were abducted during SOG maritime operations and then indoctrinated at the SSPL village on Paradise Island by the actors. Then, they were returned home with a radio (tuned to the SSPL channel), leaflets and gift kits and told to spread the word about the SSPL (1999, 137).

Other special projects included booby-trapped items and counterfeit currency. Most of the expertise for these projects came from the CIA's Far East logistics office in Okinawa (1999, 137). Many AK-47 rounds and mortar rounds were booby trapped and left along the Ho Chi Minh Trail by SOG reconnaissance patrols for the NVA to find. There was evidence of casualties incurred by enemy personnel due to these devices (1999, 158). The idea that Chinese ammunition was no good added to the psywar effort to make the North Vietnamese distrust their Communist allies. "Intercepted NVA communications revealed that the doctored ammunition was a concern to NVA soldiers" (1999, 158). MACV put out a policy that no captured weapons should be used due to the faulty ammunition problem. Unfortunately, a US warrant officer was injured anyway when an AK-47 blew up in his face. SOG capitalized on this accident by publicizing the incident on the Armed Forces network to further discredit the Chinese ammunition (1999, 159).

Overall, the goal of the psywar program was to convince Hanoi that it had real

internal security problems. It failed in this respect because the primary resistance operation for example was notional. In 1966, Colonel Blackburn (SOG's second Commander) "observed that it [Op 33] became more than a nuisance to the North Vietnamese, and beyond that 'wasn't accomplishing anything'" (1999, 162). He further noted that the enemy "followed their propaganda up by doing something more" (1999, 162). As alluded to earlier in the research, the decision by the Johnson administration not to foment a real insurgency in North Vietnam undercut the effects of the psychological operations division. The first three SOG commanders all proposed that an actual insurgency in North Vietnam was crucial to causing instability in North Vietnam (1999, 163).

Op-34 supervised the agent insertion and deception division located at Long Thanh, South Vietnam. Prior to 1968, the mission of this division was to insert and run agent teams (spies) in North Vietnam. Since starting a resistance movement was out of the question, these agents were expected to provide intelligence and conduct sabotage missions. In 1964 when SOG took over, there were only four active agent teams consisting of about 30 individuals in North Vietnam and one singleton or solitary agent. This was all that was left out of the approximately 250 agents the CIA inserted into North Vietnam. SOG also inherited the Camp Long Thanh training facility that had 169 agents in training and several safe houses in Saigon (Shultz 1999, 82-83).

The division experienced numerous difficulties and only limited success accomplishing the OPLAN 34A goals. The small margin of success was apparent only after they shifted their emphasis to deception operations in 1968. The first difficulty was the overall operating environment of North Vietnam. The North Vietnamese had an

extremely effective counterintelligence apparatus. Of the 500 agents inserted by the CIA and SOG from 1961 to 1968, only fifteen percent made it in and kept in contact. The rest were assumed captured or killed. In 1968, a comprehensive review by the CIA and DIA counterintelligence specialists revealed that the teams still in contact were all under the control of the North Vietnamese. It took the CIA and SOG seven years to figure out the doublecross (Shultz 1999, 83). This revelation would not have happened without Colonel Singlaub's decision to hire an experienced officer to review the performance of the division. The lack of experience in agent operations of some of the division's early commanders prevented them from discovering the North Vietnamese deception earlier.

After the debacle, the division spent the next year exploiting the doubled teams in a triple-cross deception campaign, this time with more experienced leadership in command of the division. The focus of the deception operation was the North Vietnamese counterintelligence personnel. They were led to believe numerous agents had successfully been inserted and were operating in North Vietnam. After a year, multiple deception efforts by this division were underway. However, President Johnson cancelled SOG operations that crossed the border of North Vietnam in November 1968 as part of the Paris peace negotiation (1999 125). This effectively ended the utility of this division's effort in the war. A later report by a North Vietnamese security officer dated March 1997 revealed that the North Vietnamese estimated the total number of agents inserted "was between 1,000 and 2,000, rather than the 500 that SOG and the CIA actually infiltrated" (1999, 127). Thus the deception operation was the sole successful tactical contribution of this division.

General Singlaub states in his book “perhaps our biggest and most interesting activity was the cross-border Reconnaissance Teams, supervised by Op-35” (Singlaub 1991, 297). The reconnaissance activities were directed at the Ho Chi Minh trail in Laos and Cambodia during the war. They were carried out by three regional subdivisions of Op-35: Command and Control North, Command and Control Central, and Command and Control South. Of all SOG activities, this division experienced the greatest degree of tactical success against enemy targets that mattered to the North Vietnamese war effort (Singlaub 2005). As stated previously, bureaucratic approval difficulties and State Department restrictions hampered this division’s efforts. Despite this, the reconnaissance teams provided the US government valuable intelligence from 1965 until 1971 concerning the amount and type of supplies and personnel being moved along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Analysis of this reconnaissance should have illuminated the importance of this line of communication to the North Vietnamese war effort, thus revealing previously invalid assumptions concerning the intentions of the North Vietnamese. The decision of the North Vietnamese to build it in 1959 and expand it in 1963 “was of strategic magnitude” (Shultz 1999, 206). Cutting off this route, as outlined in OPLAN 34A should have been a top priority.

Instead, policy makers merely increased the air support for SOG reconnaissance units and attempted to destroy what they could with air strikes. Restrictions on how far SOG units were able to penetrate across the borders were kept in place. This decision only aided the enemy’s efforts to counter SOG reconnaissance tactics and further protect their supplies. As early as 1965, General Westmoreland argued for permission to conduct cross border conventional ground operations against enemy forces. Due to State

Department concerns and international law, those requests were denied. Therefore, as an operational commander who could not fight the war operationally, he was never able to capitalize on SOG reconnaissance to any great degree.

Strategically and operationally, the human intelligence provided was invaluable, although under-appreciated by policy makers at the time. For example, intelligence garnered by SOG operatives surrounding the use of the Ho Chi Minh trail should have revealed the strategic importance of the trail to the North Vietnamese war effort. Perhaps the division's greatest tactical contribution was in terms of economy of force. By 1971, the North Vietnamese Army devoted almost 4 divisions' worth of troops and 10,000 air defense weapons to protect the Ho Chi Minh trail against no more than 50 US led SOG personnel at any one time (Plaster 2000, 466). The Division's final contribution concerned the North Vietnamese 1972 spring offensive. Unfortunately, the SOG generated intelligence was largely ignored by MACV and the attack was a surprise to most (Shultz 1999, 265). The "offensive, which was spearheaded by Soviet tanks, initially consisted of 120,000 NVA troops attacking across the DMZ, in the central highlands, and over the Cambodian border northwest of Saigon" (1999, 265). On 30 April 1972 SOG stood down and was disbanded.

In the final analysis, from 1964 to 1968, all SOG divisions contributed in a fashion toward achieving the goals of OPLAN 34A. However, from 1968 to 1972, only the aviation, psyops, and reconnaissance divisions contributed due to Johnson's decision to halt SOG's activities in North Vietnam. After his election, President Nixon never significantly altered the objectives of SOG or made full use of their capabilities during his presidency. In summary, SOG did not contribute to the strategic goal of causing North

Vietnam to stop fomenting the war in South Vietnam. Furthermore, they did not cause the level of instability in the North Vietnamese rear area or restrict the North Vietnamese use of the Ho Chi Minh Trail envisioned in OPLAN 34A. Therefore, they did not achieve their implied operational goals. With the assistance of conventional forces, a large-scale guerrilla movement in North Vietnam, or perhaps a greatly expanded unconventional war capability, things might have been different. As quoted in the beginning of this effort, NVA Colonel Bui Tin said that “to prevent North Vietnam’s victory, the United States would have had to “cut the Ho Chi Minh Trail” (Shultz 1999, 206).



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Conclusions

Despite the tactical successes, SOG was neither strategically nor operationally useful in Vietnam. The ability to maneuver and conduct battles by the North Vietnamese was not impacted to any great degree by SOG's activities other than what was already mentioned in the research. The unconventional war effort was more or less a nuisance to the North Vietnamese. History shows that they continued to maintain control of their rear area and move supplies and personnel to fight the war in South Vietnam. They were still strong enough to mount a major offensive in 1972 and again successfully in 1975. Thus, SOG did not contribute significantly to the Vietnam War effort. Had SOG operations been linked to the conventional fight and restrictions lessened or dropped, the unconventional war effort might have been more effective.

The significance of the conclusion to the field of study and related problems is that future presidents should ensure they know their enemy before committing military forces against it. Knowing the enemy will help ensure the correct forces are used and in the right manner. Furthermore, they must know the true capabilities and limitations of their military and paramilitary forces. There are advantages to using SOG type forces in limited wars. They have a low visibility signature, can be disavowed, and are by their nature extremely flexible. Furthermore, if applied to the correct targets, they can be extremely successful. Deciding what the force can actually accomplish is critical, although quite possible if planners conduct competent mission analysis. Restrictions

should be carefully weighed during mission analysis to ensure the courses of action proposed will still meet the commander's intent. Whether or not the military or CIA is the paramilitary force of choice seems irrelevant. The advisors to the President need to ensure he or she has the correct information in order to make command decisions regarding the use of force. This applies today in the GWOT as well.

The difference in presidential approaches to conducting limited war proved critical to an organization like SOG. Conducting large scale paramilitary operations that the US government would potentially have to acknowledge, explain, deny or disavow caused the President great risk at home as well as on the global stage. The presidential advisors should have known just how much could have been done covertly without causing a war that expanded beyond the scope of what was acceptable. Both Kennedy and Johnson shared many of the same key advisors, such as Secretary of Defense McNamara and Secretary of State Rusk. These individuals made numerous miscalculations and failed to provide their Presidents with the information they needed to properly execute covert operations in the context of a limited war strategy. Ineffectual advisors and Johnson as a cautious, almost timid Commander in Chief proved devastating to SOG's paramilitary efforts. Note Secretary of Defense McNamara's thinly veiled excuse for his failure in Vietnam.

I concede with painful candor and a heavy heart that the adage applies to me and to my generation of American leadership regarding Vietnam. Although we sought to do the right thing--and believed we were doing the right thing--in my judgment, hindsight proves us wrong. We both overestimated the effect of South Vietnam's loss on the security of the West and failed to adhere to the fundamental principle that, in the final analysis, if the South Vietnamese were to be saved, they had to win the war themselves. Straying from this central truth, we built a progressively more massive effort on an inherently unstable foundation. External military force

cannot substitute for the political order and stability that must be forged by a people for themselves. (1995, 333)

Research does not support McNamara's conclusions. Numerous actions reasonably could have altered the fate of South Vietnam. Among those was the effect of a unconventional war effort unconstrained by bureaucratic mismanagement from 1961-1968.

Though SOG operations were not truly useful in Vietnam as originally intended under OPLAN 34A, their tactical contributions were important. Many modern special operations units trace their origins and many of their tactics back to SOG. In particular, special operations aviation units routinely conduct selected SOG-type operations in the GWOT. From personal experience, the aviation close air support, assault, and extraction techniques developed by SOG have not changed much in almost thirty years. The primary difference is that modern equipment now makes it easier. SOG operators also pioneered the high altitude low opening (HALO) airborne insertion techniques still in use by Special Operations Forces today. Further contributions involved weapons handling and break contact battle drills still taught today to reconnaissance personnel at various schools. In addition, the criticality of having forward air controllers with ground experience supporting troops is still as true now as it was then. Further study of SOG tactics, techniques, and procedures proves useful to operators faced with similar mission profiles. Furthermore, unconventional warfare unit commanders should also study SOG to understand and hopefully avert the strategic and operational blunders that might be repeated by senior policy makers unfamiliar with unconventional warfare operations.

### Recommendations

One recommendation involves revisiting a SOG tactic used by their psychological operations division. Booby trapping enemy ammunition seems incredibly useful in Iraq where insurgents are ambushing US troops using ammunition locally acquired. Since the Iraqi insurgents do not have a foreign resupply network developed, they should be extremely vulnerable to attacks of this sort. If it worked in Vietnam, why not use it today with greater success? The US could always deny that they did it. Modern psychological warfare assets could further exploit the efforts and make the insurgents fear using their available ammunition. If it saves lives, it seems worthy of consideration (Plaster 2005).

This effort also produced numerous recommendations for further study. The debate over whether limited war is more favorable than total war continues today and is a topic for further research regarding its modern day applications in the Global War on Terrorism. Another topic involves the CIA's efforts in South Vietnam. In particular, the utility of the infamous Phoenix Program has a special relevance today since the target of Phoenix was the Viet Cong insurgency. Perhaps lessons learned from that study still apply to the counterinsurgency operation in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Another topic involves whether or not the CIA or DOD should control paramilitary operations in the GWOT. As stated previously, this was also an issue during the Kennedy administration. The NASAM 55, 56 and 57 memorandums from the Kennedy administration mentioned earlier in this work highlight an important point concerning current operations. Note the following quotation from a recent *New York Times* article by Douglas Jehl.

The recommendation by the Sept 11 panel on paramilitary forces was one of the farthest reaching. Its report called on the Defense Department to take charge of

“directing and executing paramilitary operations, whether clandestine or covert,” tasks that have routinely fallen within the intelligence agency’s domain.

In the years before Sept 11, the intelligence agency “did not invest in developing a robust capability” in this area but relied on proxy forces organized by agency officers, the report said, with unsatisfactory results. Rather than invest money and personnel in the intelligence agency and the military for paramilitary counterterrorist operations, the report said, “the United States should concentrate responsibility and necessary legal authorities in one entity.”

Under current directives, the military’s Special Operations Command already has the authority to organize, train and equip the elite commando force and to plan and execute its missions against terrorists. (2004, 2)

Apparently, the same issues that Kennedy grappled with still have relevance today concerning DOD’s role in conducting paramilitary operations.

Tragically, SOG’s cost of conducting the unconventional war against North Vietnam was incredibly high. SOG forces “suffered casualties not comparable with those of any other US units of the Vietnam War” (Plaster 2000, 466). In Op 35 alone, 163 SOG Green Berets were killed in action and 80 were reported missing in action (MIA) (2000, 466). Only one of the soldiers missing in action was released after years of torment as a prisoner of war. The rest of the MIAs remain unaccounted for to this day. Casualties in the aviation units that supported SOG were also high, though not recorded in detail. In addition to the USAF C130 crew lost over North Vietnam, numerous USAF, USMC, US Army and allied aviators lost their lives in support of SOG operations. Finally, though no precise records exist, research shows numerous allied casualties among the Chinese Nungs, South Vietnamese, and Montagnards as well.

In summary, the development of SOG was not an entirely new thing, but it was revolutionary in the history of American warfare. Although small in size, it provided the Operational commander (GEN William Westmoreland) with the capability to conduct

operations, if so directed and correctly resourced, that could have had significant operational impact on the enemy's efforts. Due to decisions from higher levels of command (the NCA) these operations for the most part were never conducted, and therefore never realized their true potential. It is a credit to the heroic sacrifices of men in SOG that they accomplished as much as they did.

## GLOSSARY

- Clandestine operation. “An operation sponsored or conducted by governmental departments or agencies in such a way as to assure secrecy or concealment. A clandestine operation differs from a covert operation in that emphasis is placed on concealment of the operation rather than on concealment of identity of sponsor. In special operations, an activity may be both covert and clandestine and may focus equally on operational considerations and intelligence-related activities” (JP 1-02 2001, 89).
- Counterinsurgency. “Those military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency” (JP 1-02 2001, 158).
- Direct action (DA). “Short-duration strikes and other small-scale offensive actions by special operations forces or special operations capable units to seize, destroy, capture, recover, or inflict damage on designated personnel or materiel. In the conduct of these operations, special operations forces or special operations capable units may employ raid, ambush, or direct assault tactics; emplace mines and other munitions; conduct standoff attacks by fire from air, ground, or maritime platforms; provide terminal guidance for precision-guided munitions; conduct independent sabotage; and conduct anti-ship operations. Also called DA” (JP 1-02 2001, 158).
- Foreign internal defense (FID). “Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. Also called FID” (JP 1-02 2001, 212).
- Guerrilla warfare. “Military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held or hostile territory by irregular, predominantly indigenous forces” (JP 1-02 2001, 229).
- Grand tactics. A failure of strategic military doctrine that fails to focus on the political aim to be achieved (Summers 1982, 89).
- Insurgency. “An organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict” (JP 1-02 2001, 262).
- Low visibility operations. “Sensitive operations wherein the political-military restrictions inherent in covert and clandestine operations are either not necessary or not feasible; actions are taken as required to limit exposure of those involved and/or their activities. Execution of these operations is undertaken with the knowledge that the action and/or sponsorship of the operation may preclude plausible denial by the initiating power” (JP 1-02 2001, 313).

Psychological operations. “Planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals. The purpose of psychological operations is to induce or reinforce foreign attitudes and behavior favorable to the originator’s objectives. Also called PSYOP” (JP 1-02 2001, 430).

Raid. “An operation, usually small scale, involving a swift penetration of hostile territory to secure information, confuse the enemy, or to destroy installations. It ends with a planned withdrawal upon completion of the assigned mission” (JP 1-02 2001, 440).

Terrorism. “The calculated use of violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological” (JP 1-02 2001, 534).



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